The World's Leading Mystery Magazine

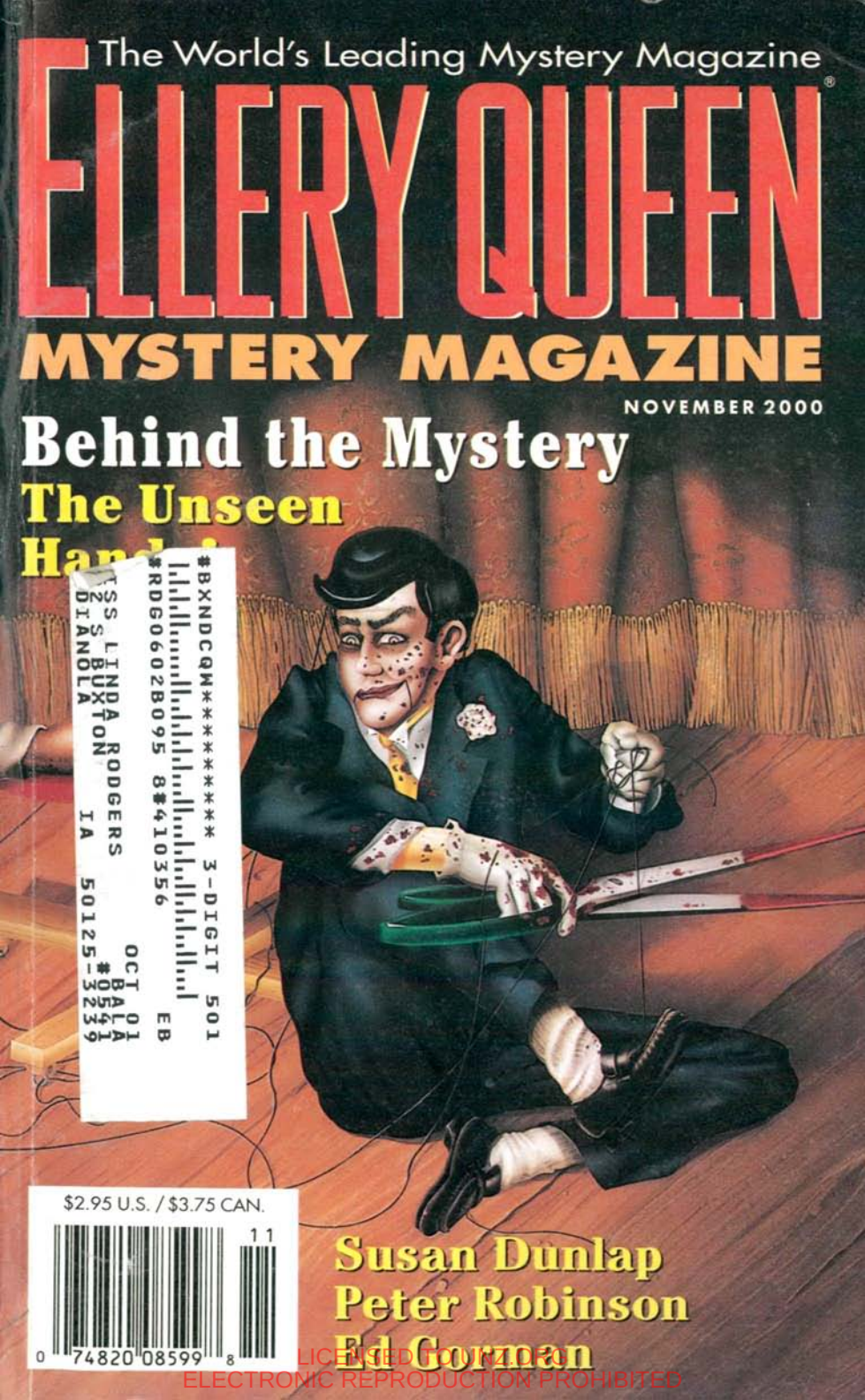
ELLERY QUEEN MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NOVEMBER 2000

Behind the Mystery

The Unseen

Hand



#BXNDCQW********** 3-DIGIT 501
#RDG06028095 8#410356
MS LINDA RODGERS EB
2 S BUXTON
DIANOLA IA 50125-3239
OCT 01
BALA
#0541

$2.95 U.S. / $3.75 CAN.

0 74820 08599 8 11

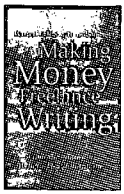
Susan Dunlap

Peter Robinson

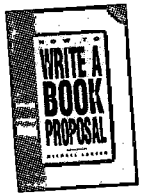
Ed Gorman

LICENSED TO UIZ LOPEZ
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

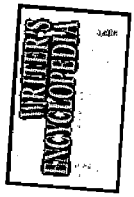
Discover the Secrets of Fiction Writing that Sells!



#10501 $19.99

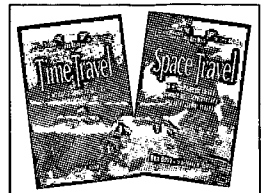


#10518 $14.99



#10464 $22.99

#48041 $18.99



#43162 $33.98 *Counts as 1 selection.*

#43057
$27.98 pbs
Counts as 1 selection.
Volumes 1 & 2

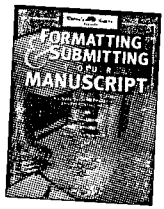
#10366 $17.99

#10025 $19.99

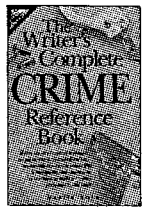
#10532 $17.99

#10541 $19.99

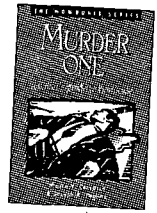
#10567 $17.99



#10618 $18.99



#10371 $19.99

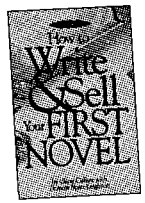


#10498 $16.99

#10500 $22.99

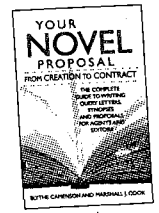
#48030 $17.99

#10632 $24.99



#10530 $16.99

#10631 $18.99



#10628 $18.99

AS A CLUB MEMBER, YOU'LL ENJOY:

- **DISCOUNTS FROM 15-65%** on every book you buy!
- **FREE SHIPPING AND HANDLING** on prepaid orders (after this joining offer)!
- **SATISFACTION GUARANTEED 100%!**

HOW THE CLUB WORKS

You'll receive the *BULLETIN* every four weeks (fourteen times a year) featuring the Main Selection and 100 or more of the newest and best books for writers. If you want the Main Selection, do nothing. We will send it to you automatically. If you want a different book or want nothing that month, just indicate your choice on the easy-to-use Selection Card and mail it to us. You'll always have at least 10 days to decide and return your Selection Card. However, if late mail delivery ever causes you to receive a book you don't want, you may return it at Club expense. As a new member, you are under no obligation to buy any more books—you're just trying out the Club for 9 months. After that, you may cancel at any time. Every time you buy a book from the *BULLETIN*, your membership will be renewed for 6 months from the purchase date.

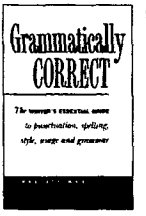
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

TAKE 2 BOOKS FREE*

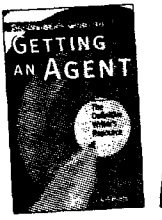
WITH A 3RD FOR JUST $11.99 WHEN YOU JOIN WRITER'S DIGEST BOOK CLUB!

10602 $18.99

#10483 $17.99



#10529 $19.99



#10630 $16.99

#10553 $18.99

MEMBERSHIP SAVINGS CERTIFICATE

☐ **YES!** I want to join Writer's Digest Book Club. Please sign me up and send me:

My first FREE book #_____	FREE
and my second FREE book #_____	FREE
with my third book #_____ for only	$ 11.99
*plus shipping and handling	$ 6.53
all for just	$ 18.52

(Payment in U.S. funds must accompany order. In Ohio add 72¢ tax. In Canada, please provide a street address and enclose $8.93 for shipping and handling plus $1.46 for GST for a total of $22.38

☐ Check enclosed or Charge my ☐ VISA ☐ MasterCard

Acct # | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | Exp. Date: _____

I have read How The Club Works and understand I have no obligation to buy any more books.

Signature_____
required on all certificates

Name_____

Address_____

City_____ State/Prov. _____ ZIP/PC_____

Writer's Digest BOOK CLUB

Limited time offer good for new members in the U.S. and Canada only. Please allow 3-4 weeks for delivery. All applications subject to approval.

P.O. Box 12948 Cincinnati, Ohio 45212-0948

EQ29

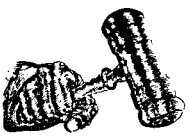
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CONTENTS

Elusive suspect
Page 30

First woman cop
Page 120

Cover Illustration by
Bill Burrows



Dell Magazines
475 Park Avenue South
New York, NY
10016

Note: indicia on
page 143

FICTION

A Storm on the 103rd Floor
BY D.R. SCHANKER 4

The Emerald Expert
BY EDWARD D. HOCH 15

Eight Lives BY SUSAN DUNLAP 30

Straight, No Chaser
BY RAYMOND STEIBER 42

Three Nil BY MAT COWARD 56

The Summer People
BY BRENDAN DUBOIS 69

Missing In Action
BY PETER ROBINSON 86

Daddy's Boy BY DONALD OLSON 103

Anna and the Players
BY ED GORMAN 120

REVIEWS

The Jury Box BY JON L. BREEN 83

DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

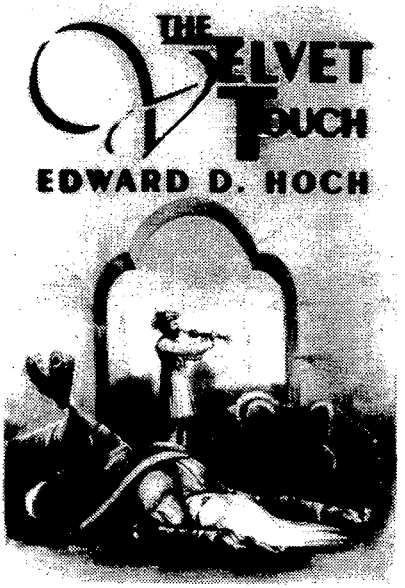
Prey BY ALICEANNE MORE 112

POETRY

Mean Clara BY KATHERINE H. BROOKS 142

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

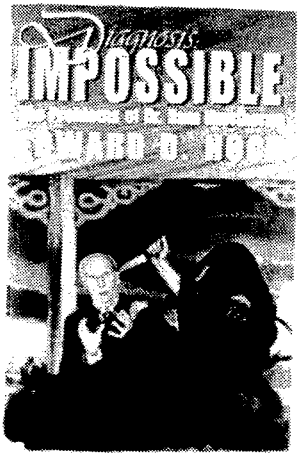
BOOKS BY EDWARD D. HOCH!



NEW!!!!!!!!

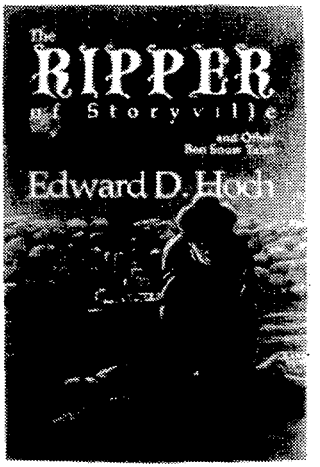
THE VELVET TOUCH

14 stories about Nick Velvet, including all his encounters with the White Queen. Signed numbered clothbound (ISBN: 1-885941-41-2) with an additional tale in a separate booklet, $40.00; trade softcover (1-885941-42-0), $16.00.



DIAGNOSIS: IMPOSSIBLE

Sam Hawthorne stories. Trade softcover (1-885941-02-1), $16.00.



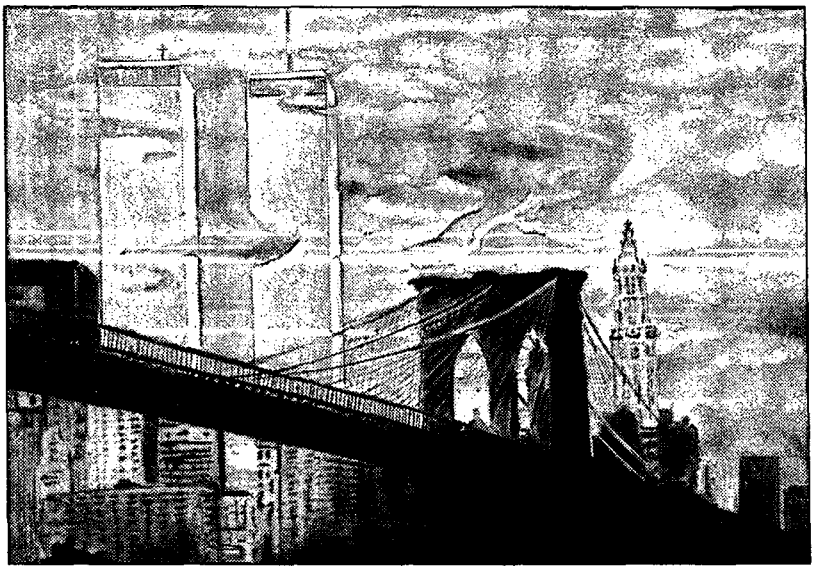
THE RIPPER OF STORYVILLE

Ben Snow stories. Trade softcover (1-885941-19-6), $16.00.

For sale from mystery bookstores, or order directly from the publisher, including $2.25 s/h for the 1st book in the U.S.; $1.00 each additional copy. Virginia residents add 4.5% sales tax. We accept Visa, MasterCard, and American Express. Email: CrippenL@Pilot.Infi.Net; website: www.crippenlandru.com

CRIPPEN & LANDRU, PUBLISHERS, P.O. BOX 9315, DEPT. E
NORFOLK, VA 23505

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Art by Steve Cavallo

A Storm on the 103rd Floor

by D. R. Schanker

Harry, the security guard, is a retired cop, a burly Irishman with a fearless interest in natural phenomena, large and small. Tonight he is in his glory. The 103rd floor of World Trade Center Two, occupied in its entirety by the law offices of Wilson & Taylor, is enveloped in thick, roiling thunderstorm clouds, and Harry and I are the only remaining inhabitants. Together we stand in my office and stare into the luminous gray void on the other side of the window. Harry, after asking my permission, has turned off the lights to "enhance the effect." I listen, weary and vaguely annoyed, as Harry rattles on happily.

"I'll tell you something, Mr. C—if this window was shattered, you'd be sucked right outside, the difference in air pressure is so great!"

I grunt, sinking to the lowest level of cordiality. A clap of thunder

©2000 by D. R. Schanker

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

echoes me and reverberates sonorously, like a parade bass drum. It is followed by a flash of lightning, which registers through the clouds as a dull brightening that immediately decays and falls away, fast pursued by another, more emphatic, beat of thunder, one that causes me to jolt back from the glass and sends Harry into an effervescence of pleasure.

"Oooh! How about that one! And let's hope the airlines have got their radar working! I'm just waiting for the day when . . ."

David Schanker's short fiction has appeared in publications such as the *Chicago Tribune*, and on NPR's "The Sound of Writing." When his first full-length novel, *A Criminal Appeal*, was published in 1998, it earned an Edgar Allan Poe Award nomination from MWA. Mr. Schanker's debut piece for *EQMM* makes perfect reading for a dark and stormy night . . .

I turn and look at Harry, at his ruddy, kind face, and I cringe with guilty amusement at the way Harry has assumed the role of father figure. Twenty minutes ago he squeezed his larger-than-life presence into my tiny office and has been "keeping me company" until quitting time—*his* quitting time. He's worried that I'm going to be lonely. I consider for a moment whether to explain to him that I would just as soon be left alone. This is not to say that I don't like Harry. I do. But the most difficult task in life is to provide oneself with a little room to breathe and the clarity of mind necessary to work efficiently. I'm honestly thankful for the occasional night when I have to work late, free from the barrage of clients and secretaries and office boys and meetings and memoranda on the firm's softball team and gossip with the other attorneys on who's leaving and who's going to be made a goddamn partner. I'd like to say all of this to Harry, but I don't. I'm not cruel.

"You really planning to stay all night, Mr. C?"

"I'm afraid so."

"It's that merger tomorrow, isn't it? Some South American outfit?"

"Yes, Ecuadorian."

"And they stuck you with the loose ends, didn't they?"

"Such is the lot of the humble associate."

"Well, I bet that pretty girlfriend of yours is missing you tonight, eh, Mr. C?"

"I'll be missing her, too," I say, amazed at how cold I sound.

"And hey, I never got a chance to congratulate you on your engagement! How come I'm always the last one to hear about these things? I don't know why they didn't put out a memo!"

"I don't want to make a big deal about it."

"But it is a big deal!"

"No, that's not my style."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Well, suit yourself."

I do.

"Something else you ought to know, Mr. C, if you're really planning to be here all night, is that in a storm like this the top of the building can sway up to ten feet in either direction!"

"You're kidding," I say, though I know he's not.

"I am not kidding! It's a wonder the building doesn't topple right over! And I hope you've got something to settle your stomach, 'cause when this baby starts to go, it's gonna move, and you're gonna be walking around like a drunken soldier, believe you me!" He grips my arm and gestures toward the interior of the building. "Listen. Can you hear that?"

I listen. And hear, quite distinctly, a steady creaking sound, so much like the ropes and sails and hull of a wooden ship that, despite my fervent wish to end this conversation, I have to comment.

"That's right. That's just what it sounds like," says Harry. "It's going to get louder, too. And one more thing—don't be alarmed if you hear doors slam and papers falling off desks!"

I widen my eyes in mock alarm.

"Just warning you, that's all." He glances at his watch. I look, too, and see that it's just after midnight. Thank God. "Quitting time for me, Mr. C. Keep in mind that the cleaning people will be coming through sometime before three A.M. If you have any problems, there's a security guard on duty all night at the seventy-eighth floor Skylobby." He grins—Harry gets a big kick out of seeing an attorney work later than he does. "I'm out of here."

"Goodnight, Harry."

"Good luck tomorrow," he says, turning on the light as he exits, throwing a fluorescent glare over the window. I stare for a moment at my reflection, hovering coolly in the mist, disheveled and forlorn, and I imagine my body transported through the frigid ionosphere, just outside of gravity's hold, suspended between earth and moon. A cool, bespectacled satellite, that's what I'd be—the first attorney in space.

Feeling washed out, relieved to be alone, I return to the neat piles of documents I've arranged on my desk in an attempt to budget my time for the rest of the night. Jack Schmitz, head of the firm's Latin American mergers department, asked me to spend the night comparing the final drafts of the merger documents to the previous drafts to make sure all the parties' requested changes had been made—a damned babysitting job, if you ask me, unworthy of a Columbia J.D. I get stuck with this crap because they know I'll do it. I don't know how to say no, that's my problem.

It's just as Lisa said. This afternoon we had the latest in a continuing series of arguments over what she considers the unreasonable demands of my job—the billable-hours requirement that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

keeps me here seventy hours a week. I had promised her that I'd be home tonight, that we'd have dinner in front of the TV like other couples, and that maybe, just maybe, we'd head up to bed early. . . . But then Jack Schmitz popped his head into my office to ask me for a "tiny" favor—as if I had a choice in the matter. And so I broke my promise to Lisa. For the sixth time this month.

I don't think I'm ready to get married.

I decide to take Harry's advice and put something in my stomach. At this hour, the candy machine in the firm lunchroom will have to do.

As I start to walk through the aisles, I get a taste of what Harry was talking about—and how. Damn this building! I touch the wall to steady myself and curse the fool who came up with the ungodly idea of putting offices in the sky. Hell, I could be flying at this altitude. I wonder if the city below would appear to be swaying if I could see beneath the clouds. As it is, there's no way to tell how far the building is moving, except by the groaning of the walls, which suddenly seems louder than moments ago. I don't like this. Not at all.

In the lunchroom, I settle on a Three Musketeers and quickly tear off the wrapper. I sink my teeth into the fleshy chocolate fluff and slowly catch my breath as I chew down a thick wad of it. Disgusted, I stop myself from scarfing down the entire bar immediately and stumble back to my office.

In the center of my desk is the 327-page monster, the main event, the merger agreement between our client, StateBank, N.A., a mid-sized New York bank, and Industrial Nacionale de Ecuador ("INE"), the seventh largest bank in Ecuador. I begin to read through it, comparing the current draft to a prior draft, when I hear an odd squeaking sound. At first I think it's the building, the sound of some new stress on this steel and concrete roller coaster, but a moment later I hear whistling, an unrecognizable tune, and I nearly jump out of my seat when I see the front end of a utility cart cross in front of my open doorway, followed by the hunched-over figure of a man with curly black hair falling into his eyes.

His upper torso abruptly jerks back; he is as startled to see me as I am to see him, but then he grins, showing a mouthful of bad teeth.

"Good evening," I say, and he nods in response. "It's a nasty night out there," I go on, handing him my wastepaper basket. He nods again in response, and it is clear that he has not understood what I've said. He empties the wastebasket into a garbage can that he is wheeling behind him, then he hands it back to me. "Thank you," I say, and as I take the wastebasket I notice an odd tattoo on his forearm—it looks like an octopus with its tentacles spread. I smile, embarrassed to be staring at his arm, and he nods, his eyes seeming to search my face. "Is there anything else?" I ask, at which he looks confused, and now his gaze takes in the whole of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

my office, as if he were looking for something. I watch him closely, and the quiet that settles over us is filled by the sound of the building slowly swaying. Finally, he moves on, the cart squeaking as he goes.

I turn to the merger agreement once again, my skin crawling with resistance to the tedious task of proofreading. But as I thumb through an old draft of the agreement, I find tucked among its pages a short confidential memo to the partnership written over a year ago by Cameron Hume, then the head of the firm's Latin American mergers department. I read the memo, quickly at first, my heart accelerating as the meaning of Hume's words—and their consequences—sinks in:

> We have received a classified State Department report that Ecuador's ambassador has expressed fear that the proposed INE-StateBank merger would have serious consequences for Ecuador's fight against cocaine trafficking. It has come to the attention of Ecuadorian authorities that INE is in fact a money-laundering front for an Ecuadorian cocaine cartel known locally as *"El Pulpo"*—"The Octopus."

The Octopus! My mind flashes to the tattoo on the janitor's arm, and feverishly I read on:

> Ecuador warns that the proposed merger would provide the financial backing to permit the cartel to dominate cocaine traffic in central South America and that it could lead to war between *El Pulpo* and its nearest rival, a gang known as *"La Araña"*—"The Spider." It is my recommendation that the firm advise StateBank to back out of the merger with INE and inform the State Department of our action.

I look again at the memo, my glance falling on the date, June 14, 1999—just days after I joined the firm as an associate. Two weeks later, Hume had been killed in a helicopter accident.

Hands trembling, I fold the paper and slip it carefully back where I found it, wondering why the merger is still on and why we're a part of it. Perhaps Hume was wrong, I tell myself. I never heard anything about any drug connection to INE. Hume was killed, along with three others, in a freak accident. Or so they said.

I try not to think the unthinkable, but I can't help myself. What if Hume had been killed to prevent StateBank from backing out of the merger? Who would have a motive to do such a thing? INE, certainly, and no doubt there were those at StateBank who were

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

determined that the merger take place. And us, of course—the law firm of Wilson & Taylor stood to make millions from its role in the merger.

I decide to call Jack Schmitz, despite the hour.

"Hello?" A woman's voice, hoarse with sleep, answers after eight rings. Schmitz, a recently divorced fifty-something, was rumored to be making the most of his new freedom.

"I need to speak to Jack Schmitz. It's urgent."

"I hope so." I hear her pass the phone across the sheets.

"Who is this?"

I identify myself and tell him about finding Hume's memo.

"You #@!&* woke me up for that?! What the #@!?* is the matter with you, Carter?"

I tell him about the janitor with the octopus tattoo.

"Jesus @#*!& Christ! Just make sure nothing happens to those documents! You hear me, Carter?!" With that, he hangs up.

I take a deep breath and attempt to chase the paranoia from my mind as I try vainly to continue proofreading. Even lulled by the rhythm of the building's creaking bones, I cannot concentrate for more than a few seconds at a time; my mind keeps returning to the image of that tattoo, and I find myself listening nervously to every sound.

A half-hour later, the storm outside has intensified. The neat stacks of documents on my desk start to vibrate, then move, as the building's trajectory increases. Lightning crackles beyond the clouds, and the thunder is deafening. I clutch the desk to keep my chair from rolling back as the Three Musketeers congeals into a hard lump in my stomach, and I am wishing I had some Dramamine.

Then, abruptly, it is quiet. The sway of the building diminishes and I begin to catch my breath. I stand and lean my head against the window to cool my forehead. I am holding it there and breathing deeply when I hear the shots.

The shots sound like the explosions of distant bombs, two of them, and the sound is softer than the thunder but unmistakably gunfire. I turn abruptly from the window, my heart beating like mad, and through my panic I feel the vibration of footsteps running along the corridor that extends in one square circuit around the floor.

Then I hear a moan.

It is low, nearly inaudible, and I cannot ignore it. I step out of my office and walk slowly past the secretaries' desks up the corridor toward the sound, listening for footsteps, but I hear none. I walk along the south side of the building, which on a clear day would show a spectacular view of Battery Park but which tonight shows nothing but gray. At the southwest corner, I turn north, and then I see him—the janitor—at the far end of the corridor, lean-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing against the wall, his chest darkened with blood.

I move toward him, trying to hurry but finding that my legs must be forced to act. I stagger like a puppet, each step pulling me forward agonizingly. As I come closer he looks to me, beseeching, and finally I find the courage to move swiftly to him. The storm seems to come alive as I do, and there is suddenly the loud howling of wind whipping around the tower. I fall to my knees, the janitor clutching at my arm, and he whispers, *"La Araña . . . La Araña."*

He coughs then, and blood erupts from his mouth. I back away—hurl myself away, really—and in an instant he is dead.

I grab the wall and pull myself up. The lightning intensifies; it is as if hundreds of flashbulbs were exploding around me, and here and there the shaft of a lightning bolt can be seen through the clouds. I want desperately to return to the sanctuary of my office, where I can call for help.

I take four steps and the lights go out.

A blackout! All around me computers shut down, lights are extinguished, clocks stop, and the din of a myriad of tiny fans in machinery is silenced. The only light is the luminous light of the lightning-drenched clouds outside, gilding everything inside with a soft, flickering, silvery veneer.

I walk on through the eerie half-light, praying that the shooter had made his escape before the blackout. I spot one of the secretaries' phones and quickly pick it up. It is dead, as I feared, the victim of the firm's new, electricity-dependent computerized phone system. I drop the phone and decide to head for the elevators, hoping against hope that they are on some kind of emergency electrical system. I take off in a sprint, but after an instant I stop short; I cannot see—the light filtering in from outside is too dim—and I cannot hear for the pounding of my footsteps on the carpet and the hammering of my heart. I am suddenly gripped by the fear that whoever killed the janitor is there on the 103rd floor with me and that he knows he is not alone.

I walk slowly, as silently as I can, listening to the groans of the building. I turn the corner from the west corridor to the north, and my heart leaps when I see there a light, an EXIT sign suspended from the ceiling, at the building's midpoint, where the elevators and stairways are located. I quicken my pace, seeing now a clear path in front of me, but as I near the sign I hear something—a sound like water running—and I remember that the restrooms are there, too. It occurs to me that a sink has been left running, or—and my mind is working fast to concoct comforting scenarios—the blackout has triggered an automatic sprinkler. I continue up the corridor toward the men's room door, and there I see, in the crack beneath the door, the movement of a light—a flashlight. I stop in my tracks.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I back away, preparing to run, but the door opens before I can turn. In the dim light I see a wide-eyed face, scowling with surprise, and the impression of a dark green uniform—for a joyful instant I think he's another janitor, and I am about to implore him to help me when I smell it—that's the first thing—a strong sulfurous smell that I imagine is the smell of a fired weapon, and then I see a dark shape in his belt. Simultaneously he swings the flashlight up toward my face and reaches for the dark shape, but I don't wait for the shots. I'm out of there, my legs suddenly dragging me across the office, past the elevator banks, zigzagging, practically leaping as I go. I make it to the south corridor, where I duck into an office and press myself against the wall.

I am breathing too hard, too loud, breathing through my nose, then through my mouth, then my nose again as I try to quiet myself, but I cannot get enough oxygen.

I hear nothing. Either he has not followed me or he is stalking me slowly, knowing that he stands between me and the stairway. But I hear nothing, only the rhythmic sound of the building as it sways. I am aware, abruptly, that the storm has calmed—the thunder is intermittent, the lightning has died down, the wind no longer lashes the windows.

I listen. My breathing has eased, my heart has calmed. My mind turns wildly to thoughts of Harry, his animated face, his exaggerated concern for my safety, and of Lisa, dear Lisa, alone in her warm bed . . . God, how I long to be there!

I move slowly toward the door, listening—I hear no one—and carefully lean my face into the corridor, looking first one way—no one—and the other way—no one. I don't know what to do. I know I cannot wait there for him to find me and kill me. I must get away.

I step into the corridor and walk quickly back toward the elevators, but suddenly I smell it again, that strange sulfurous smell, and I stop short. My eyes begin to sting, and though it is too dim to see it, I realize there is smoke in the air, heavy smoke, and then I hear the muffled roar of flames. I turn and walk quickly toward the west corridor, where my office is located, and before I turn the corner I see the flickering of an orange light on the corridor walls.

No, I whisper, no, but it is! A fire—in my office—and not a small fire but a blazing bonfire of legal documents, no doubt soaked in gasoline or some other accelerant, and it is lighting up the corridor and pumping smoke up against the ceiling. Flames lick the top of the doorway, and I stand, transfixed, wondering why the sprinkler system does not kick on, when suddenly it does. The ceiling spouts showers of water all along the corridor; there is a cold spray on my face and back, and, shivering, I make a beeline for the elevators and the stairwell. I hear nothing, see no one, as I approach the elevator bank, but suddenly there is a rhythmic

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thump thump thump behind me—a thumping of shoes against the carpet and a jangling of metal—a man running with keys in his pocket. As I reach the door to the stairwell, I turn to see him coming around the corner to the elevator bank, gun drawn, and I do not hesitate another second. I open the door, leap toward the metal banister, and, grabbing it with both hands, hurl myself into the air and down the first flight of stairs.

The stairs are bathed in dim yellow emergency lighting, just enough to make the stairs and landings distinguishable, and I am already in sight of the 102nd floor—the numbers are painted big on each stairwell door—when I hear the door above me open and the man begin to descend the stairs. I am running now, jumping from one landing to the next, trying not to fall or succumb to the agony in my knees. A shot echoes in the stairwell, then another, and I let out an involuntary cry when I hear the ping of a bullet hitting the banister just inches from my hand. The sound makes me jump, my legs turn to jelly, and I fall over them, tripping onto the landing and slamming against the wall on the 99th floor.

I stop. I can't go on, and I am grunting and wheezing with the pain in my body and the intense throbbing of my head. There is silence for an instant, but then I hear his footsteps accelerate—he is at best two floors above me—and I know I must move.

I pick my body up and I move. My flesh feels like dead weight to me now, but I propel it, with growing hysteria, down each flight of stairs. I can tell that he, too, is tiring, and now we are in this dance for the long haul, pushing methodically, mechanically down each flight. My mind cries out: I won't let him outlast me, I won't let him gain on me. I am at the 92nd floor, then suddenly it is the 89th, then the 85th—and the lights flicker on.

We are now descending through a bright fluorescent-lit shaft, and as I hear him get closer I am praying, God, just let me make it to the 78th floor, to the security guard. He'll be armed, he'll stop this insanity.

By the time I get to the 78th floor, my pursuer is just one floor above me, and I plunge through the door to the 78th floor and into the Skylobby, with its wide green, marble-walled bank of express elevators going directly to the ground-floor lobby. At the far end of the Skylobby is the security-guard's station, a semicircular desk overlooking the elevator bank. I race toward it, but I am halfway there when I read the sign propped up on the desk: GUARD ON TOUR. BACK IN 15 MIN. On tour with whom? I wonder. Willie Nelson?

I hear the stairway door open behind me, and I run toward the elevators. I touch the button to call an elevator, and to my eternal gratitude the doors to the elevator directly to my right slide open immediately. I rush—practically fall—into the elevator and press

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the button for the ground floor, then frantically slam my fist against the Close Door button.

To no avail. The elevator waits—and waits—as I watch my pursuer come closer, his face flushed with anger and determination, the gun held shakily in front of him. Just as he is about to reach them, the elevator doors begin to close, but he throws his body between them and tumbles through.

The doors shut smoothly behind him.

He has fallen, but he is on his knees and he is pushing himself up as the elevator begins its precipitous descent. The gun is in his right hand, which he is about to raise, and I can think of nothing to do but to jump on his back and try to wrest the gun away.

I press my weight against him, attempting to push him down onto his chest, but he is too strong, and so I must ride him. He has the gun in his fist, pushing against the elevator floor; I reach for it with both hands, and he pushes me over onto my back and now he is on top of me, his back to my chest, and our arms entwine as I struggle to grab the gun, or at least to deflect it. Above me a lighted panel indicates that we have dropped below the 50th floor.

He shoots. The shot pierces the elevator's metal wall, and the bang of the gun nearly deafens me. I grab again for the gun as the lights indicate our descent to the 30th floor, and he shoots again. This time the bullet smashes the fluorescent light in the elevator ceiling, and fragments of glass and powder float down over us, like snowfall, as we are plunged into semi-darkness, the lighted panel providing the only illumination.

The man pushes himself off me, leaving my shirt damp with his sweat, our hands still united around the gun, but now he is above me, and he wrenches the gun away, his arm flying back from the force of his effort. I push myself up from the floor as he brings his hand down and aims the gun.

A chime sounds. We have reached the ground floor. The doors open before he fires, and there, awaiting the elevator, is a thick crowd of forty, sixty, maybe a hundred policemen, firefighters, emergency medical technicians, and others. They are as shocked to see us as we are to see them.

The man puts the gun in his mouth and fires.

"Hell of a storm last night," Harry says the next evening. He has popped his head into my office "for just a second"—or so he said. I am there rummaging among the piles of wet, half-burned documents to gather some essential belongings to move to the other side of the building while my office remains sealed as a crime scene. "And that's the last time I leave *you* alone here."

"No kidding," I say. "Too bad you missed all the excitement."

"Ahh, no thanks," he says. "Seeing it on the news was enough

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for me."

"It would have been for me, too."

"It looks like the firm bought itself some trouble, dealing with those dope peddlers. And you got in the way when the you-know-what hit the fan."

"Such is the lot of the humble associate."

"I've been asking around, talking to some of my old buddies on the force. The word is that the guy who was trying to kill you was part of some dope gang—they call themselves 'The Spider'—that was trying to scotch the Ecuadorian deal. And the guy he killed was part of a gang that was trying to protect the deal."

"So they tell me."

"Why'd the firm get involved with people like that?"

"I don't know."

"Is the deal gonna go through?"

"I doubt it. Not when we've got the FBI, the CIA, and the State Department investigating."

"And how's that pretty girlfriend—fiancée—of yours? I'll bet she was worried sick when you told her what happened."

"Yes, she was." Worried wasn't the half of it. After being questioned by the police and checked over by the medics, I had gone home and called Lisa and told her everything. She left work immediately and came over; we spent the day in bed together, sleeping and talking and holding each other. Thankfully, she is still my fiancée. And I made her a promise I don't intend to break.

"You're not workin' tonight, are you, Mr. C? Haven't you got enough billable hours this week?"

"I'll be leaving in a few minutes, Harry. And I won't be spending too many more evenings here. Life's too short."

"You said it," he says. We shake hands and he makes his way down the hall, as though taking my words to heart.

It's 6:30 P.M. and dusk is settling over the city. I go to my window and take deep breaths of the smoke-scented air. My stomach is still unsettled—the result, no doubt, of fear, and I can swear that the building is still moving.

The magnificence of the view braces me, and I rub my eyes like a child, with both hands, to wipe away the sticky film of too little sleep. The setting sun illuminates the gold-painted torch of the Statue of Liberty, the tugboats of New York harbor, and the filaments of cable holding up the Verrazano Narrows Bridge. It's all so still, so quiet, so peaceful. I thought I'd wanted all of this—the office in the heavens, the excitement of cutting-edge international corporate law, the big-firm practice, and the prestige and the pay that go with them.

Now, I have a promise to keep—to find another job, somewhere closer to the ground. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE EMERALD EXPERT

by Edward D. Hoch

In his retirement, Leopold paid little attention to criminal cases unless they involved a particularly baffling murder. The routine drug killings, robberies, and domestic violence held scant interest for him except as human tragedies that might have been avoided. On the occasional evenings when he and Molly dined with Captain Fletcher and his wife, little was said about the daily operations of the Violent Crimes Division. That was all in Fletcher's hands now, and he was doing a capable job of it.

Perhaps this accounted for the fact that Leopold had read little about the Jaspar case until a week before the trial was scheduled to begin, and then the news reached him in an unusual manner. "It's for you," Molly called out to him one Tuesday evening in April, holding the phone for him.

Edward D. Hoch is as remarkable for the range of subjects on which he keeps up-to-date as he is for the number of stories he writes—and it is, perhaps, the need for new material for his stories that keeps his research keen. This month Mr. Hoch demonstrates that he has kept in touch with technical developments in the field of gemology. His retired police detective, Captain Leopold, is back in a twisty whodunit involving the Violent Crimes unit.

He took it and heard a voice from the past. "Captain Leopold, this is Henri Scarlotti. Do you remember me?"

"I certainly do, Henri! How's the jewelry business?" It must have been close to twenty years since they'd seen each other, but Leopold still remembered the jovial little Frenchman with the Italian name. He'd conducted a seminar for law-enforcement officers on jewel thefts, and later testified as an expert witness at a local trial.

"I am a full-time gemologist now, working with a team of French geochemists. It's a pleasure to be back in America for a few days."

"Where are you?"

"I flew into Boston today, but I'll be in your city tomorrow, to testify."

Leopold could hardly believe it. "You're coming here? For a trial?"

©2000 by Edward D. Hoch

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"The Jaspar case. Hasn't it been in the papers?"

"I may have read something about it," Leopold admitted. "Look, you must stay here with us."

"I believe they have a hotel room booked."

"Nonsense! You must stay with us. You've never met my wife Molly." Leopold was well aware of European visitors' inclination to stay in private homes rather than hotels.

"If you're sure it would be all right."

"Of course. What time will you arrive?"

"I'm taking the train tomorrow morning. I believe it arrives there at two-fifteen."

"I'll meet you at the station."

If Molly was unhappy about their sudden houseguest, she didn't show it.

"Can you pick him up?" she asked. "I have a meeting with a client tomorrow afternoon."

"Certainly. Shall we take him out for dinner?"

She thought about it. "Maybe we'd better tomorrow. I can make dinner on Thursday, and Friday if he's still here."

"They're probably figuring to go over his testimony on Thursday and have him in court on Friday. Know anything about this Jaspar case?"

"A jewel theft. A salesman was assaulted and robbed of some emeralds, and he later died. My friend Emily Benedict is one of the defense attorneys."

Leopold was at the station by two o'clock, and he recognized Henri Scarlotti the moment he stepped off the train. The trim Frenchman with the tiny black moustache hadn't changed much over two decades, certainly not as much as Leopold himself had. In his late fifties, Scarlotti could have passed for a much younger man.

"Retirement seems to agree with you," Scarlotti said as they walked to the car. "How long has it been now?"

"A few years. I retired and then they called me back. This time it's for keeps, though. Fletcher is doing a fine job. Do you still live in France?"

He nodded. "In Nancy, about a hundred and seventy-five miles east of Paris. I'm a professor at the Center for Petrographical and Geochemical Research."

"Are you married now?"

The Frenchman snorted. "No, no! Once is enough for any man."

"I'd disagree with that. I've never been happier than I am with Molly."

"I wish you well, my old friend. I'm anxious to meet her."

Molly had managed to get home early and start preparing dinner. Leopold saw that she and her guest liked one another imme-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

diately and he wasn't surprised. Henri Scarlotti was full of Gallic charm and Molly was a handsome woman. Over dinner she asked, "Is this case important enough for the prosecution to fly you over from France to testify?"

"Ah, dear lady, I am testifying for the defense in this case. As you may know, Alex Jaspar was a jewelry salesman who came here from New York to show a collection of unset stones to a wealthy client interested in having an emerald necklace designed for his wife's fiftieth birthday. She was born in May, and the emerald is her birthstone. Although such salespersons generally travel in the utmost secrecy, he was assaulted and robbed in his hotel room the evening he arrived. The jewelry company says the emeralds were worth upwards of a quarter-million dollars."

"I remember reading a little about it," Leopold said. "He died of his injuries a few days later."

"Which made the charge felony murder when the young couple were finally arrested," Molly said, starting to clear away their dishes.

"Your memory is better than mine," Leopold admitted. "Fill me in."

Molly returned with dessert. "The young man's name is Shields, Jeff Shields. He dropped out of college to make fast money on the Internet, only it didn't work out that way and he went broke. His girlfriend, Beryl Constantine, heard about Jaspar's visit and apparently persuaded Shields that they could make some easy money by stealing the emeralds. Both were arrested in New York City when they tried to sell the stones to a dealer on Forty-seventh Street."

"Where do you fit into this, Henri?"

The Frenchman dipped his spoon into the soufflé. "The young woman, who is nineteen, comes from a wealthy family that is convinced of her innocence. They have enlisted me to prove that the emeralds recovered from the pair could not have been the ones stolen from the victim, Mr. Jaspar."

"How can you do that?"

"At the research center in Nancy we have developed a method of emerald analysis in which a small sample from the gem's surface is measured for oxygen isotopes. There are only a few known mines that have produced emeralds, and each has had water with different isotope ratios. Therefore, we can identify the source of each emerald."

"You will testify to that?" Leopold asked.

"Certainly. Since the source of the stolen emeralds is known to have been a different mine, the accused must be innocent."

"Amazing!"

"I will meet with the defense lawyers in the morning to go over my testimony. They expect to call me on Friday."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Who's the girl's attorney?" Molly asked. "I know a lawyer working on the case."

"I am dealing with a Miss Emily Benedict, a very efficient young woman hired by the girl's family."

She nodded. "Emily's my friend. She's a good criminal lawyer and she's had some high-profile cases. You're in good hands."

"The young man has a different lawyer, someone named Richard Pfiezer."

"Don't know him." Molly started pouring coffee.

Leopold and Scarlotti sat up talking until after midnight. Leopold was fascinated with the Frenchman's work and wanted to learn more about it. "Did they have to send the emeralds to you in France?" he asked.

"No, no. A member of my team ran the tests in New York and faxed the results to me for analysis. A member of your police force was present at all times to make certain a substitution was not made with the stones."

"Where are these emerald mines you mentioned?"

Henri Scarlotti moistened his lips, as if warming to his favorite topic.

Leopold could imagine him giving a similar lecture to a room full of gemologists.

"One of the earliest and most fabled, of course, was Cleopatra's mine in Egypt, dating from about three thousand B.C. For a time it was believed to be the only source of emeralds other than a small mine discovered by the Romans in the Austrian Alps. Today we know there were also early mines in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and in the fifteen hundreds an emerald mine was discovered by the Spaniards in Colombia. They tortured the Indians to learn its location."

"Just those five?"

"Basically, yes. Sometimes more than one mine exists in the same general area. The vaporization method we have developed can identify the country and even the individual mine from which an emerald came. In this case the stolen gems were known to have come from the Colombian mines. Our tests showed that the emeralds recovered from the accused couple came from the Panjshir Valley in present-day Afghanistan."

"Did they explain how they came to have them?"

"A vague story of winning them in a high-stakes poker game in New York. I cannot blame the authorities for pressing charges against the pair. The young woman is from your city, and the robbery-murder took place here. If she didn't have a family who could afford a good defense, they would both be on their way to life sentences."

Leopold wasn't satisfied. "Surely the jewelry firm or its insurance

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

carrier would have had accurate descriptions of the stolen gems."

"The stones were unset. Seven were stolen and only six recovered, but they appeared to fit the descriptions. They were the same carat weight and cut. Without my testimony that might convince a jury."

"Then Beryl Constantine's family made a wise investment."

The morning was damp and drizzly, typical of April. Leopold and his houseguest lingered over breakfast while Molly hurried off to an early court appearance. "I should be home after noon," she told them. "I'll see you then, Henri. Here's an extra key in case you get back before I do."

Henri had an eleven o'clock meeting with Emily Benedict and the other defense lawyer to go over his testimony. Leopold drove him down to Emily's law office and then decided to swing by police headquarters, only a couple of blocks away. He rarely intruded on Fletcher at work, but once in a while he liked to drop in. The office hadn't changed much physically since his departure, though walking into the squad room now the only face he recognized was Connie Trent's.

"How've you been, Connie?"

"Fine. It's good to see you again, Captain." She brushed back the hair from her eyes, showing a few lines of age that he hadn't noticed before. None of us is getting any younger, he thought.

"You have to stop calling me that, you know. I'm retired."

"You'll always be 'Captain' to me. Are you looking for Fletcher?"

"I just dropped by to say hello. Nothing important. We've got a defense witness in a murder trial staying with us."

She nodded. "The Jaspar case. Fletcher heard that Frenchman was a friend of yours."

"Did you work on it?"

"A little. I took the emeralds down to New York for testing."

"Oh?" Leopold's interest was piqued. "What was that like?"

"I took all six stones down. It's a fascinating process, developed by the French. A small sample is actually vaporized from the surface of each emerald. It leaves a tiny pit on the stone, but one invisible to the naked eye. The French team and their collaborators have been allowed to test precious relics and even salvaged Spanish treasure. The New York people faxed their findings to France, and the defense had the results the next day."

"But the district attorney still went to trial."

"Of course. This particular test has never been used in a court of law. The prosecution plans to argue that it's unproved."

The squad-room door opened and he saw that Captain Fletcher had returned. "Good to see you again," Fletcher said with a wave of a hand as he entered his office. "I'll be right out."

He took off his jacket and came to join them at Connie's desk.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What brings you downtown?"

"I dropped off our houseguest, Henri Scarlotti, at the lawyer's office. We could have lunch if you're free."

Fletcher grinned. "Sounds good if we can make it brief."

Leopold gestured toward Connie Trent. "Join us?"

She shook her head. "Thanks, but somebody's got to work around here. Have fun."

Chatting with Fletcher over lunch seemed just like the old days to Leopold, though lunch had been rare when they'd both been working. "What do you think about that Jaspar trial?" he asked Fletcher at one point. "My French friend says they're innocent."

"We've got a pretty strong case. Shields and the young woman, Beryl Constantine, admit they were here in the city the night of the robbery and killing, and they have no alibis. More than that, Jaspar was in town to show the emeralds to Franklin Taft, the software guy, who wanted them made into a necklace for his wife. The Tafts are close friends of Beryl Constantine's parents, and she admits to being present when Taft told her parents about Jaspar bringing the emeralds up from New York. He even mentioned the hotel where Jaspar was staying."

"But there's no physical evidence?"

"Just the emeralds, but that's pretty strong. Or it was until the defense came up with this Frenchman's testimony."

"Did the salesman make any statement before he died?"

"He was in and out of consciousness. He answered his door, thinking it was room service, and a young man hit him across the head with something. He tried to struggle and the man kept hitting him. We found the weapon in the room. It was a sock with three heavy padlocks inside."

"What about the girl?"

"He didn't see her, but it was a woman's voice that got him to open the door. We figure she stayed in the hall as a lookout." Fletcher finished his coffee. "I have to be getting back."

"This is on me," Leopold told him, reaching for the check. That was when Fletcher's cell phone beeped.

"Fletcher here. What is it, Connie?" He listened grimly and then said, "We'll meet you there."

"What's happened?" Leopold asked.

Fletcher was already on his feet. "Molly phoned nine-one-one. There's been a shooting at your house. Somebody killed Henri Scarlotti."

The sight of police cars and detectives in front of his house, the shock of the yellow crime-scene tape already in place, had Leopold's heart pumping before he reached the front door. Connie met him there, blocking his path. "Molly's all right, she's fine. But

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

go around to the side door. The body's right inside here."

Molly was seated at the kitchen table with one of the officers, still in the gray business suit she'd worn to court. "I came home and found him like that," she said. "He was on his face, right inside the door, with the back of his head all bloody."

Leopold took her hand in both of his, feeling the lingering chill on her flesh. "Don't worry, Molly. We're here now."

"He's dead, isn't he? Murdered in our own home."

"Yes," he confirmed. "Molly, listen. Did you see anyone leaving as you drove in? Anything unusual on the street?"

"No, nothing."

Fletcher came into the kitchen. "Did you recognize him?" he asked Molly.

"I didn't see his face. It looked like Henri."

"I'd better have a look," Leopold decided, and went into the front hall.

Connie Trent lifted the head from the floor. "Is this him?"

Leopold sighed for his old friend, coming across an ocean to die like this. "Yes, that's Henri." He pointed. "There are powder burns around that wound."

She nodded. "Shot at close range."

"I'd driven him downtown to meet with the defense attorneys."

"How was he getting home?" Fletcher asked.

"He said he'd take a cab. I couldn't pick him up because I didn't know how long he'd be."

"Could someone have given him a ride back here?"

"I suppose so. You're thinking of the powder burns."

Fletcher nodded. "The killer walked in right behind him. Either he came with Scarlotti or he was hiding in the bushes. The ground's still soft from the rain and we haven't found any tracks there. That seems to rule out hiding in the bushes."

A cab pulled up to the house, behind one of the police cars, and a dark-haired young woman jumped out, shoving some bills at the driver and not waiting for change. Leopold didn't know Emily Benedict personally but he recognized her from television coverage of some of her high-profile cases. She saw them grouped in the doorway and sprinted under the crime-scene tape, heading for Captain Fletcher. "God, I just heard the news! Is it true?"

"I'm afraid so," Fletcher told her. "Someone killed your star witness. Now you'll have to get back behind the tape."

She ignored the request, staring down at the body as Connie Trent quickly covered it with a sheet. "Who would do such a thing? It'll only delay the trial."

"Please get back, Miss Benedict," Fletcher said again, and when she continued to ignore him Connie put a comforting arm around her shoulders and led her away. Leopold followed.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Is that poor kid going to have to stay in jail?" she asked them.

"Did the judge deny bail?" he asked.

She nodded. "They went to New York after the crime and he was afraid they might flee again. I tried to point out that was false reasoning if they were innocent, but he still denied bail." She shook her head, as if trying to awaken from a bad dream. "I was with Henri just two hours ago, going over his testimony with Rich."

"That would be Richard Pfiezer, the young man's attorney?"

"He's court-appointed. Shields didn't have the money to hire an attorney. Beryl's parents hired me to defend her. I wanted a separate trial but the judge denied the request."

They were standing off in Leopold's side yard, just outside the crime-scene tape. Molly had come out of the kitchen to join her friend, and after a comforting embrace they stood with their hands joined. "A separate trial is usually requested when one defendant claims to be innocent of a crime committed by the other. Was that the case here?" Leopold wondered.

"Not at all. Scarlotti's testimony about the emeralds would have cleared them both."

"Then why press for a separate trial?"

"That was before I read about this new method of testing emeralds to determine their origin. Naturally I contacted Professor Scarlotti. The tests went well, and Beryl's family paid to have him fly over here as an expert witness. Because his testimony was crucial to both our cases, Rich Pfiezer sat in on this morning's meeting too."

"How long did the meeting last?"

"About an hour. We started promptly at eleven and finished up just after twelve. Professor Scarlotti was scheduled to testify for the defense tomorrow morning. I don't know what we'll do now. Ask for a postponement, I guess."

"How did Henri get back here?"

The question seemed to puzzle her. "What do you mean?"

"Did one of you give him a ride?"

She shook her head. "I asked if he needed one and he said he was meeting someone who'd give him a ride back. He'd mentioned earlier that he was staying here and I assumed you were who he meant."

Molly had arrived home shortly after twelve-thirty to find the front door slightly ajar. She'd pushed it open and found Scarlotti lying there dead. Leopold learned that much seated at the kitchen table with her later. Fletcher and Connie had stayed on too, after the body was removed, as much to comfort them as to continue the investigation.

"I suppose there has to be a first for everything," Molly commented philosophically. "But a body inside my front door is something I wasn't prepared for."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"No one ever is," Connie agreed. "You're lucky, in a way, that you didn't get home a few minutes earlier. If you'd stumbled onto the killer he might have shot you too."

That frightening thought had already occurred to Leopold. "If the killer was with Henri, it was most likely the person who drove him home. Perhaps Henri wanted to give him something from his luggage, a gift he'd brought from France."

Molly stood up. "Much as I hate the idea, we have to go through his things."

They went upstairs to the guest room with Fletcher and Connie following along. Connie checked the bureau drawers while Leopold placed the dead man's suitcase on the bed and unzipped it. "There might be fingerprints," Fletcher cautioned.

Connie thought that was doubtful. "The house key was still in Scarlotti's hand. He was killed as soon as he entered. If the killer wanted to find something he'd have kept him alive awhile longer."

Leopold opened Henri's toilet kit and glanced at the items. He was always surprised when people carried their own soap with them and he opened the plastic container to examine it. There was a French name embossed on the top, but what attracted his attention was a thin line around the circumference of the bar, as if it had been cut apart and stuck back together again.

"What did you find?" Molly asked, peering over his shoulder.

"Probably nothing. Get me a knife, will you?"

"Will a nail file do?"

"Maybe." He carefully pried apart the top and bottom of the soap bar while the others gathered around. Inside was a scooped-out area just large enough for the single unset emerald it held.

"What we have here is a puzzlement," Leopold said, holding out the bisected soap bar for all to see. "What does it mean?"

"Does it have to mean anything?" Fletcher asked. "The man was an expert on emeralds. Maybe he just liked to carry one with him."

"Hidden in a bar of soap?"

"It's a pretty good hiding place from thieves."

Leopold turned to Connie. "You took the six recovered stones to New York to be tested. What did they look like?"

"Well . . ." She thought about it. "Like these, I suppose, only smaller."

Fletcher picked the emerald from its container and held it to the light. "Any ideas?"

"There's one possibility," Leopold said. "But I hate to consider it in connection with Henri. Seven emeralds were stolen and only six were recovered from this Shields fellow and the girl. Could this be the missing one?"

No one answered. No answer was possible yet.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

❖ ❖ ❖

Fletcher decided that both the prosecution and the defense in the Jaspar murder case had to be apprised of this latest discovery, and while he contacted the district attorney's office he asked Leopold to track down the two defense attorneys. It wasn't a difficult task. A call to Emily Benedict's office revealed that she was in consultation with Shields's court-appointed attorney, Rich Pfiezer. Leopold drove to her office to meet them.

Pfiezer was a short, intense man with dark eyes that seemed to bore into his audience when he spoke. Leopold could imagine him in front of a jury, arguing passionately for his client. Both he and Emily listened intently to Leopold's story of the emerald hidden in Henri Scarlotti's soap bar. "I don't know what it means," Leopold concluded. "But I think you may want it tested as the others were."

"And I'll have to find myself another expert," Emily Benedict said. "That won't be easy."

"What about the New York lab that performed the tests?"

"Their man is one of our witnesses. I planned to put him on the stand just before Professor Scarlotti tomorrow. But he's no expert at analyzing the data he collects."

"No sessions today?"

"The judge had another matter," Pfiezer commented with a trace of sarcasm, "as if the rest of us didn't. The prosecution has one more witness, the jeweler where they tried to sell the emeralds, and then it's our turn."

"The jeweler!" Emily Benedict flipped through her notes. "You know, there may be a way out of this without Professor Scarlotti's testimony. Do you have the jeweler's preliminary statement?"

"What's his name?" Pfiezer asked, shuffling through his papers. "Newman?"

"Jacob Newman."

"I've got it."

They'd become almost oblivious to Leopold's presence. "If you'd like me to leave—" he offered.

Emily smiled at him across the table. "You're retired, aren't you? And you're Molly's husband besides. I guess we can trust you not to run to the D.A."

She took the statement from Pfiezer and read quickly through it, looking for something. "Here it is! This Jacob Newman has a place in one of those big jewelry arcades on Forty-seventh Street in New York. Shields and Beryl came to him one afternoon last December with some emeralds to sell. He examined them at length and decided there was nothing special about the stones. He consulted some unseen partner and made an offer of five thousand dollars for the lot. Shields and Beryl insisted the gems must be worth many times that price. That was when he became suspi-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cious and phoned the police. He kept them there on a pretext of reconsidering his offer until the police arrived."

"What does that prove, Emily?" the other lawyer asked.

"Look, we know from the professor's tests that the emeralds they tried to sell weren't the stolen ones. With him dead I can't use the tests unless I get another expert, probably all the way from France. But Jaspar's jewelry company swears the stolen emeralds were worth a quarter-million dollars or more. If this Newman places the value at five thousand, and that value can be verified, then it proves they're not the same stones."

"So what are you going to do?" Pfiezer asked.

"We'll let the prosecution finish their case by calling Newman. Then on cross-examination we'll bring out the value of the emeralds he saw. I'll ask for an adjournment until Monday so we can verify the value of the stones over the weekend."

The accused man's lawyer nodded. "Sounds like a good plan to me, Emily."

"What about the emerald we found in Henri's soap?" Leopold asked.

"Since we haven't called him as a witness, and can't call him now, the matter is irrelevant. The state can't introduce it unless they can link it directly to the Jaspar case, and that's not likely. Jeff Shields and Beryl Constantine are two people who couldn't have killed Henri Scarlotti. They're both in jail. And he was their star witness."

There was no arguing with her logic. "I'll try to be in court tomorrow," Leopold told them. He owed that much to Henri.

It was another cool and rainy morning. Leopold and Molly left home together shortly before nine, and as they entered their separate cars Leopold asked, "Are you sure you're all right?"

She smiled. "Of course. Though I would like to get the bloodstain out of our carpet."

"I'll be in court until they adjourn."

The trial day started with a sidebar conference of lawyers, and while they discussed their tactics with the judge Leopold had his first opportunity to study the accused couple. Jeff Shields was in his early twenties, and even a suit and tie couldn't hide the punk wise-guy attitude he assumed while seated at the defense table. He was handsome in a crude sort of way. Leopold could see how he would have attracted a nineteen-year-old woman like Beryl Constantine. She sat pale and emotionless, separated from her lover by the empty chairs the defense lawyers usually occupied. He thought they might exchange glances but they didn't, at least not that Leopold could detect. From his seat across the courtroom and slightly behind them he could only see the right side of Beryl's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

face. It was an ordinary face, not unattractive without makeup, and her body seemed understandably tense. Her brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail perhaps deliberately designed to make her look younger. It seemed obvious that a middle-aged couple seated directly behind her were her parents.

Finally the sidebar discussion ended and the prosecution summoned its last witness. Jacob Newman was a bearded man with glasses who spoke with a strong New York accent. He told of his jewelry counter in one of New York's 47th Street arcades, of his advertisements stating that he specialized in fine emeralds, and of the two defendants who appeared on a damp December afternoon and offered to sell him six unset stones. He felt the two were acting suspicious and remembered a police flier to jewelry stores reporting a recent theft of seven emeralds from a jewelry salesman. He said he'd have to show the stones to his partner in the rear of the store and went back to phone the police. He kept the couple at his counter, haggling over the value of the stones, until two officers arrived and arrested them.

Emily Benedict rose slowly at the conclusion of his testimony, gave a brief glance at her notes, and walked forward to confront him. Leopold admired her courtroom manner and the brisk directness of her questions. "Mr. Newman, what value would you place on the six emeralds the defendants attempted to sell to you?"

"I didn't have an opportunity to fully examine them."

"But what was your first reaction? Did you think of these stones as having high value, medium value, or low value?"

He thought about it for a moment. "Toward the low end of the scale. I made an offer of five thousand. That may have been a little low, but the stones were far from top quality."

"You're aware that the stolen emeralds were valued at a quarter-million dollars?"

"Yes. Of course that value may have been inflated. And I saw only six stones. The missing one may have been the largest, though a jeweler would be unlikely to create a necklace with one perfect stone flanked by six inferior ones."

Emily Benedict took a deep breath. "Mr. Newman, is there any possibility in your mind that the six stones you examined, even in a cursory manner, could have been part of a consignment of seven valued at a quarter-million dollars?"

He took his time answering, glancing over at the prosecutor, then said, "It's extremely doubtful."

Emily smiled and stepped back. "No further questions."

The prosecutor rose for redirect, stating, "Mr. Newman, the recovered stones correspond in carat size and appearance to the insurance-company descriptions of the stolen ones. Given that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fact, and your very brief examination of the emeralds, isn't it possible that you were mistaken in your judgment of their value?"

Leopold could see the question made the witness uneasy. But he must have remembered his role as a prosecution witness and he answered, "I could have been mistaken, yes."

"No further questions. Your Honor, the state rests its case."

Emily Benedict was on her feet with an obviously prearranged motion. "Your Honor, due to the unavailability of a witness, the defense requests an adjournment until Monday morning."

"Granted." The judge banged his gavel. "This court stands adjourned until ten A.M. on Monday."

Leopold sought out Emily as the jury filed out and the prisoners were taken away. "That seemed to go well. The prosecutor must have agreed to your request."

She nodded. "But only until Monday. He won't allow me time to find somebody else in France. We'll have to go with the testimony on the value of the emeralds. I'm contending they were different stones entirely, won in a poker game as Jeff Shields alleges."

The couple whom Leopold had picked out as Beryl's parents joined them then, and Emily introduced Leopold. Mrs. Constantine was a dark-haired woman in her late forties, more attractive than her daughter but just as tense. "What do you think?" she asked. "Does Beryl have any chance without that Frenchman's testimony?"

"We hope so," Emily told them, outlining the argument she'd be using. "I think I can plant a reasonable doubt in the jury's mind."

"I'd give anything to have her out of this," Mr. Constantine said.

"If we're lucky," Emily told them, "a week from now it'll be all over."

When the Constantines left the courtroom, some of her confidence seemed to leave with them. "Yeah," she told Leopold, "it'll be over a week from now, but I wouldn't want to bet on my client's chances."

"Would it be possible for me to speak with her?"

"What?" His question had taken her by surprise.

"I want to speak with Beryl Constantine at the jail. Naturally I'd expect you to be present too."

"Why do you want to see her?"

"I think she can tell me who killed Henri Scarlotti."

Emily arranged the jailhouse meeting for three o'clock that afternoon. Leopold phoned Molly to tell her where he was and then phoned Fletcher at the squad room. For a moment it seemed like the old days as he told Fletcher what had to be done.

"You've got no evidence for this," Fletcher grumbled.

"I hope I will have, later this afternoon. I'll phone you as soon as I know for sure."

Leopold and Emily met with her client in the stark conference

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

room at the jail. "Do you have any news yet?" Beryl asked, her green eyes full of hope.

"Nothing yet," Emily said. "This is Captain Leopold, retired from the police. He thinks he may be able to help."

She turned toward him. "Really?"

He spoke her name softly. "Beryl, that's a lovely name. Beryl, I have to ask you just one question."

"Yes?"

"Where did you hide the seventh emerald?"

Her face froze, the expectation draining from it. She panicked, turning to Emily for help. "Didn't you tell him I'm innocent?"

Leopold sighed and continued talking softly. "Beryl, you overheard your parents' friend talking about having an emerald necklace made for his wife's fiftieth birthday. You knew when the jewelry salesman would be at the hotel. That much came out at the trial. You told your boyfriend Jeff and he decided to steal the gems. According to the dying man's statement, he never saw you in the room, although you must have been in the hall because he heard a woman's voice before he opened the door. Jeff gave you the largest emerald and you both went to New York some days later to sell the other six stones. That's when you were arrested. Isn't that how it happened?"

"No!"

"The trial's not over, Beryl. There's still time for you to change your plea to guilty. Miss Benedict might even be able to work out a plea to a lesser offense, since you weren't in the room when Jaspar was fatally injured."

"It's a strong possibility, Beryl," she told her client. "I didn't raise it before because you wouldn't agree to a request for a separate trial."

The young girl stared at Leopold as if afraid of what he might say next. "Why don't you believe me?"

"Because you have lovely green eyes, child, and because emeralds are a transparent form of the mineral beryl. That's why Jeff stole the gems, and why he kept the biggest one as a gift to you."

She started crying then, but Leopold needed one thing more. "Jeff stole the emeralds from Jaspar, didn't he?"

"Yes," she said finally. And then, to her attorney, "Help me, I'm so afraid!"

As soon as they left the jail Leopold phoned Fletcher at his office. "She's admitted the theft and Emily Benedict is arranging for a plea bargain right now. The missing emerald is hidden in her parents' basement. That's all we need. Go get him."

Thirty minutes later, Fletcher and Connie arrested Jacob Newman on suspicion of murder as he was boarding a train back to New York.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

❖ ❖ ❖

"It was a simple case," Leopold told Fletcher later that evening, after Newman had signed a confession. "It only seemed complicated because Henri's murder became entwined with the Jaspar trial. Two kids, probably acting nervous and suspicious, went down to New York with six stolen emeralds and chose Newman's counter in the jewelry district because he advertised himself as specializing in emeralds. He realized at once that the jewels were valuable and probably stolen. Pretending to consult his partner in the back room, he substituted six very similar but inferior emeralds."

"It's quite a coincidence that he had inferior emeralds of the right carat, weight, and shape just waiting there," Fletcher said.

"The coincidence isn't so great when you realize the man specialized in emeralds. Naturally he'd have a great many sizes and shapes in stock for customers. And these seemed like safe kids to pull a switch on. When they complained about the price he offered, he simply reported them to the police."

"Go on. Before I read Newman's confession I couldn't figure out where the Frenchman fit into any of this."

"Newman figured he had nothing to worry about. It was his word against a couple of kids. But then he heard about Henri Scarlotti and the newly developed test tracing the origin of emeralds."

Fletcher shook his head. "How did you ever come up with Newman as a suspect? He and Scarlotti didn't even know each other."

"Scarlotti told the lawyers he was meeting someone who'd give him a ride home. It seemed clear that this person entered our house with Scarlotti and then shot him in the head. Why had Scarlotti met the person and invited him into the house? The answer came when I found that emerald hidden in Henri's bar of soap, probably to keep it safe and also to avoid customs duty. It wasn't the missing emerald from the Jaspar theft, not when it was hidden inside a bar of French soap. Henri had brought it with him, no doubt planning to sell it in New York. When he heard a jeweler specializing in emeralds was one of the trial witnesses he contacted him. Newman met him and drove him to my house, but he wasn't interested in more emeralds. He just wanted to keep Henri from testifying that the recovered emeralds couldn't have been the stolen ones. He carried a gun for protection, and as soon as they were off the street he shot Henri with it. I suppose he figured by the time the defense found another expert witness in France and flew him over here he could sell the stolen emeralds and maybe even leave the country. He was buying time for himself."

"He'll get plenty of time now," Fletcher said. "About twenty to life, I figure." ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art by June Levine

EIGHT LIVES

by Susan Dunlap

Iris McNair wasn't young twenty-five years ago when the police found the remnants of her husband's body in the pantry. "The Crime of the Century," newspapers had shrilled then, before a dozen or more Crimes of the Century had shoved it aside along with Iris McNair.

Now, at the quarter-of-a-century anniversary, I was the only reporter on the shuttle to do an Iris McNair Remembered for the only newspaper editor in the country who thought she'd still sell an extra paper or two. The guard was waiting for me when I climbed down the bus steps. I was also the only woman on the bus and his: "Miss Armitage?" was perfunctory. He led me through a gray corridor, past some sort of large silvery clanging machinery that could have been for heating or even air conditioning, for all I knew, and into a small gray room that held nothing but two tables and eight plastic chairs. The stench of old cigarettes lay like a coating on floor, tables, chairs, walls, and covered the barred window like a dirty curtain. And even though there was nothing to see through it but a strip of hard-trod brown earth, that layer of grime

©2000 by Susan Dunlap

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that could have been removed so easily summed up the room. It was better than the standard interview room, but only marginally.

As for Iris McNair herself, I had expected a wispy-haired wraith grinding her sitting bones into a hard chair. But only the hard chair part was correct. Iris McNair looked quite good for a woman well into her seventies, her chin line firm, her bust still "high and outside," to quote one of my colleagues in Sports. Of course, she had a lot of free time to lift weights, do isometrics, or whatever. Her skin was barely wrinkled and so white it was as translucent as if she'd had daily facials. Against that incredible skin, her violet lipstick virtually screamed. In another setting the lipstick would have been an old lady's wink and shrug at society, but here, in this gray interview room, watched over by the hefty, tan-uniformed guard, it was like a shocking photograph in the Museum of Modern Art. Under a froth of white hair her blue eyes glistened, made all the more startling by the lipstick. I let my gaze linger—okay, I stared—so I could mull over that image when I was writing up the story, to decide whether those blue eyes were windows into a pool of sorrow or a grease-fire of resentment.

The guard stood by the door, feet planted, arms crossed over his uniformed chest. Was he going to hover over her and ruin the entire interview? I understood caution, but it wasn't like I was going to slip her a kilo of coke or anything.

As if he'd heeded my thought, he gave the room a final surveying glance and strode out the door.

I extended a hand to Iris McNair. "I'm Barbara Armitage, from the *Courier*—"

"Yes, yes. I know how far you've come to interview me."

She seemed almost to rise from her body—a slight form in a plain blue cotton dress. Her voice had that twang that seems more akin to West Virginia than western Pennsylvania, and reminds you of the proximity of the two states. And it had a throaty rasp that, despite its unhealthy connotations, I always like in an old lady. It brought to mind the picture in the paper after her arrest. Things were moving so fast then that the editors must have

Says mystery writer Susan Dunlap: "I've written twenty-three short stories, two of which have won Anthony Awards, and seventeen mystery novels." Those mystery novels fall into three categories: the Jill Smith books, which feature a police detective; Kiernan O'Shaughnessy's private-eye tales; and the Vejay Haskell amateur detective novels. It's been more than twenty years since Ms. Dunlap last appeared in *EQMM;* we're happy indeed to have her back!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

grabbed the first file photo they could find and been glad they had one as striking as that.

That file photo had been taken thirty years earlier, in the wake of World War Two, when Iris had been interviewed after one of the big hurricanes that knocked trees through roofs and cars and turned trailers into scrap metal. Then she had been a young woman, with shoulder-length dark curly hair held back by a bandanna; she was wearing shorts and a halter, smoking a cigarette and laughing. "When you live in a trailer you've got to be ready to move," she had said, sitting atop the remains of that trailer. There had been such an appealing insouciance in the way she'd planted herself, arm braced on bent leg, her foot resting on the defunct trailer's wheel—a pinup picture for the disaster set. Plucky was the word the reporter used. Pluck is what the public likes to see in disaster victims.

"Not much new I can tell you, what's your name? Barbara, right? Barbara, honey, I've said it all by now. You're hardly the first reporter my guards have shown in to see me. During the trial, when I was in the county lockup, well, I was as popular as beer in a dry county. There was a time when reporters had to take numbers." She paused, reached as if for a water glass and, realizing there was none there, went on, "One of them—he was from some little paper outside Pittsburgh—added up in his mind just how much of a raise he might expect after he had his go at the state's favorite axe murderess. He balanced that against what he could sell his low number for and bought himself a plane ticket to California. He was the smart one." She smiled, but that painted lipstick smile looked uncomfortable on her face and disappeared so quickly I wondered if I had imagined it.

I couldn't decide whether the point of that story was the trip across country and its ironic appeal to a woman locked in a cell on a murder charge, or if it was a hint to me. If the latter, I was ignoring it. This interview hadn't been easy to arrange. My trip here had been twice as long as I'd expected. I was damned if I'd let Iris McNair intimidate me. Still, I found myself shifting in my chair, one as hard as hers, and wishing a pitcher of water would appear by magic.

"The *Courier's* readers won't find you old news," I said. "Twenty-five years is a long time. People forget. Things change."

"Things change?" She laughed, and it was not a compassionate sound. "You think after all this time George will be less dead, his body hacked into fewer pieces? Well, I suppose he has changed over these twenty-five years and not for the better."

I must have gasped. She laughed again, then patted my hand. "Sorry, hon. You were expecting a better-behaved little old lady. But I always did have a mouth on me. That's what attracted

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

George in the beginning. He liked a woman who didn't take any guff—that's what he said. Liked some other things, too, but I'm not going to shock you that much, though a roll and tickle probably aren't shocking at all anymore. I suppose you're going to want to have your own angle on this story, so you just ask away."

I took out my pad—no tape recorder had been the stricture—and used the time to readjust my perception. I had planned to cloak myself in the garb of the sympathizer. Now I could see that that would get me nothing but scorn, and I'd end up spending days sifting for what I could use as a story. I tapped my finger on the pad and looked her in the eye. "Why did you decide to give me this interview?"

That made her smile. "Boredom. You can't imagine the boredom. People think of this place as a country club, but you don't see any golf course, do you?" She flourished a work-worn hand at the dirty window and the hard brown earth beyond. "So, hon, you're my eighteen holes for the day. I'm a sucker for games, puzzles, crosswords—At home, before I came here, I always had a jigsaw half done on the table and a crossword book by the couch—kept the boredom away back then, too, showed me where Marseilles is in the map of France, and gave me a passel of two-dollar words. But this game you're putting on the table here makes a nice little challenge for me. I want to see if I can figure out what you're going to write. Maybe I can change it." She paused and stared me down. "Maybe I can even give you that warning and still win."

"And if you're wrong?"

"Then what're they going to do—throw me in jail? I already had my trial, remember?" At that she laughed so hard I could swear I saw her dentures jiggle.

We weren't looking at each other through a glass wall, speaking into phones. Seated on either side of a table, we might have been in any bland room, the kind the cleaning crew at a hotel use for coffee breaks. I'd been surprised we weren't in the main room, one softly speaking twosome among many. But I could imagine the other inmates—no, guests was the proper term—were leery of Iris McNair and it suited them and her to contain her affairs to this lesser room. I wondered if it was the violence of the crime that put them off, or the tawdriness. Or maybe it was the sharp edge of her tongue they feared.

Whatever the reason, it impelled me to start with the hard question. "The murder, Mrs. McNair. You've always insisted you didn't do it, that you were innocent—"

"I didn't insist; I made my statement once and only once. After that I only answered questions, like you're asking. You're asking me to tell you what really happened, right? Hoping that after all this time I'll let my guard down and let something slip out and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

you will get the scoop that all those guys took numbers for. No, don't try to deny it. What other reason would you come all this way for?"

I wasn't going to deny it, which made her comment all the more annoying. Pointedly, I sat back. Pointedly, the chair jabbed into my back. And there was nothing I could do about that either. I certainly wasn't about to let her see me squirm again.

It was she who squirmed, though, playing with the edge of the table, looking for something to do with her hands, the way ex-smokers do.

"I'm not going to paint George any better than he was. He had his faults. These days I might probably have divorced him. Back then, you just put up with it. But just remember, hon: Even back then, long-suffering didn't mean 'fool.' No, ma'am. Not by a long shot."

"That was only nineteen seventy-four—"

"Not the Middle Ages, you mean? Let me tell you something, hon. Nineteen seventy-four was one thing in New York City and a whole 'nother thing in Linokin, P.A. Linokin was a little town, closer to the West Virginia border than to Pittsburgh. In the winter there'd still be days you sat home and waited for the snow to melt enough to get your old Ford down to the hard-top. Nineteen seventy-four, hah! Life was so hard in Linokin it might as well have been eighteen seventy-four. My own house, the one George and I lived in, was half a mile up a dirt road from the hard-top. No central heat, just a little wood stove and a fireplace. In winter the sun didn't clear the hillside till two in the afternoon, and that damp chill that grabbed you by the ankles never let up from October till May."

The dust was getting to my throat. I swallowed and prompted, "About George?"

"I won't go on about George's sins—the man's dead and the dead deserve some respect. They were nothing that'd pop your eyes open, anyway." She shrugged, then turned to me with a flicker of a smile that seemed to say she was willing to help me but on her own terms. "Here, I'll give you this, and it'll make a nice image for your story. After George's murder the neighbors took pity on me, an old woman all alone, and they gave me a kitten. Somebody wanted to get rid of that kitten, I understand that now and understood it then, but that doesn't make less of their kind thoughts in time of trouble. I appreciated their thinking of me, though I have to tell you, I was never one of those women who yearned after a furry critter to fuss over. Living alone's not the worst thing that can happen to a woman. And those tins of cat food weigh down a grocery bag, 'specially when the road to the hard-top was too slick or muddy for the Ford. Still, he was a pretty

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

little gray Persian with the brightest green eyes you'd ever want to see. Made people smile when they saw them. Like two jewels sitting on a bed of silver velvet. And move? That cat moved like liquid silver. He'd leap up onto the shed in one light bound as if he'd never heard of gravity. Or he'd be lying so alert nothing shifted but those eyes. He was a stunner, that cat. Tinsel, I called him." For the first time her face softened, her smile looked at home there, and her own blue eyes were as bright as Tinsel's must have been.

"Was your husband George handsome?" I said, after a moment.

"Oh my, yes. That's what caught my eye to begin with. He was a looker, and when he danced it wasn't just me who was doing the looking. He moved like a cat, himself, every step sure, every move gliding toward where he wanted to be." She was smiling now, a roll-and-tickle kind of smile, and I could tell the picture was live behind her eyes.

From that one photo I had seen of her after the hurricane, I could imagine the pair of them, a footloose couple in the footloose times of the Second World War, with no thought of the future because there might well be no future. All their energy dancing into the night.

"Yes, George was something. When Tinsel came, later on, he was just like George—that same natural grace, the same— Well, I'm sure my neighbors never imagined that other part."

"Other part?"

"Tinsel was a kitten when they gave him to me. Not neutered yet, and what with the trial and all, I was too busy to bother and I didn't have the money anyway. Tinsel came and went as he pleased, didn't make an effort to get back for his dinner, and then when he did come dragging in, he'd set up a howl if his dish was empty. He did nothing about the mouse in the kitchen, but in his little furry mind, every bird in the yard was just his for the taking. I can't tell you how many mornings I walked into the kitchen to find a half-eaten bird on my jigsaw puzzle. I'll tell you, hon, dead birds don't do much for the map of France. I smacked that cat good, pushed his nose into the dead feathers and smacked him again, but if anything, that just put his back up. If a cat could have grinned and swaggered, Tinsel would have done it."

"Like George? Are you saying he did the same kind of thing earlier?"

"Well, not the bird part."

I was scribbling like mad. She was right, she hadn't mentioned this to any reporter I had read. And it was going to make a great color paragraph. In itself, a cat easing an accused killer's loneliness would be enough to assure the piece a spot above the fold on page three. "But you still insist that you did not kill George."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Miss Armitage, my husband was slaughtered with an axe!"

"I'm sorry," I muttered, feeling ridiculous about apologizing for making the statement we both knew I'd come to ask, and more ridiculous for reacting with horror to her reply. But the vehemence with which she said it made the discovery seem fresh.

It must have done so for her too, for she went on. "You can't imagine what it was like. I'd been out, see—you must know all this—I'd been to the market. I still had the grocery bag in my arm. Just one bag. George and I were only two people, and George liked his food fresh. So I went every day. Same time. Around four, because that was when the eggs were marked down. Up till then they were 'fresh,' but at four they became 'day-old' and twenty cents cheaper a dozen. Not that I bought eggs every day, not even once a week, but you get into habits, and it was just easier to go every day at that time. Oh, you're giving me that look."

"Look?"

"The look I get from young reporters who grew up in cities. You're thinking: 'The produce is fresh in the morning. Why didn't she go then?' And the answer, honey, is that back then in a small town it wasn't all that fresh. Transport wasn't all that fast. And produce pretty much came in when the farmer or the delivery truck got there. It wasn't as if we had three huge Costcos or Grand Unions or K Marts to choose from. We had the one grocery and we took what they offered and never thought any more of it."

"So you always went at four."

"Right, and everyone knew that. The first deputy sheriff who came said whoever killed George must have been hiding somewhere along the road to the hard-top, waiting for me to leave. The ground was firm, dry then, easy to cut across. He must have come in the house—in small towns doors were open back then—and . . ." She swallowed so hard her head bobbed and there was a little sound of desperation from somewhere in her throat. "It was awful. Just awful. I never dreamed a man could hold so much blood. Even after it was all over and the floors scrubbed with industrial-strength cleaner, I kept finding dried blood in corners and cracks. All the time I was waiting for the trial I'd find it. But when I first walked in, it was like someone had taken a red hose and doused the kitchen and the pantry and the little hall to the bathroom." She swallowed again, took a breath, and looked directly at me. "There weren't footprints—this is what the police said—because there wasn't enough clear floor to hold a print. It was all slimy with blood."

I nodded slowly. Of course I'd read this description in every account of the case, but now it was as if the horror of the day had been reborn in her and passed to me. I could see the kitchen,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ankle-deep in gooey red. It seemed almost obscene to ask: "And George's body?"

"In the pantry." The cords in her throat pulled tight like a fist. They almost strangled her voice. "I saw part of his thigh, cut off like a leg of lamb. I slammed the door and ran before I had to see any more. I thank the Lord for that. I can't imagine—I don't ever let myself imagine what condition he was in by the time his killer finished with his axe. George's axe."

"The one George kept inside the door, handy to grab and go out to chop wood," I paraphrased from my readings.

"It was coated with blood and . . . blood." She'd grabbed onto the edge of the table but even that didn't keep her hands from shaking. "The police took it. That's what Gabriel Haskins—" The name seemed to give her a jolt. She bolted upright in her seat, inhaled deep, and said—"Haskins, that miserable excuse for a district attorney, glommed onto the axe when he accused me, as if just because it was our axe meant no one else could have used it. The miserable man held it up in front of every camera for every newspaper in the area when he accused me. 'Wife Suspected of Axing Man,' the headlines said, and there beside them was a picture of Gabriel Haskins holding up that axe like it was a trophy or something. He didn't even bother looking for the real killer."

I swallowed as much against the awful image as the dusty catch in my throat. "Mrs. McNair, you must have given a lot of thought to that real killer."

"I've had twenty-five years to do it."

"And?"

She took her time, giving me a reassessing stare. "You reporters always ask that, but most times it's just to show readers I'm still a hard old woman, filled with vengeance. They say that I've gone bitter, or some say I always was. Some carry on about how can I go from picturing George's blood one minute to getting all analytical the next. But you, you look like you're asking serious. So I'll tell you one thing to start with. After twenty-five years of reflecting on something, even something as bad as your husband being chopped to pieces with an axe, you learn to turn it off and put your mind to other things. Like with a magazine, you turn the page, look at a different picture. You do that or you go crazy. Whatever reporters may have said, no one ever accused me of going crazy."

I nodded. "The focus has changed now. It's still a shocking crime but now it's also a human-interest story. The focus isn't the murder, Mrs. McNair, it's you. And what you've worked out will interest my readers."

She leaned back. For the first time her hands stopped fidgeting or grabbing. She folded them on her lap. "Okay, hon, here's what I've worked out. My George was a carouser. Everybody knew that.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It's why it was so easy for Haskins to get me arrested. The boys in the sheriff's department weren't eager. I'd known most of them since they were knee-high, ran into their parents in the market, their grandparents in church. One of them actually apologized for having to ask me to sit in the back of the cruiser on the way to the jail. But none of that influenced Gabe Haskins. He was out to get me. He told that jury I was the abandoned wife. I was hot for revenge 'cause I'd had all I could take. That I knew George was tomcatting around, and I came home and George said something like he was taking our savings to spend on some tramp and I went berserk and killed him."

I nodded. "That's what he said in his summation."

"But"—her hands had come unfolded and she was tapping her finger hard against the table now—"here's what Gabriel Miserable Haskins didn't say: Who was my George shacking up with? It takes two to tango, now don't it? And Gabriel Miserable Haskins had a flashy redhead of a wife. Muriel was a woman with eyes on the fast life in the big city. She wanted Gabe to get a job in Pittsburgh or Harrisburg or even Philly. Or run for office. And that's just what he was going to do. He was a mousy little man, brown on tan, if you know what I mean. But Muriel convinced him mousy was what voters wanted in their senators. He grew himself a moustache, trimmed it pencil thin; it looked like he drew a line over his mouth to remind people it was there. And he was planning to be our next state senator."

"And?"

"Well, you can't be running for office if it comes out your wife has been running around. Nobody wants to vote for a fool. Lord knows it's been done enough times, but nobody does it on purpose."

"Still, if Muriel was the one who wanted to leave town, surely she wouldn't have wanted to create an impediment."

Iris McNair smiled. "Did you say you'd seen a picture of George? He was a hard man to resist. Particularly for a flashy woman married to a mouse. A mouse who was away a lot at boring party meetings. Besides, honey, she wasn't planning to do it on Main Street. Linokin was woodsy country back then, lots of places to park where no one's going to find you."

"So why wouldn't Haskins just let the affair go unnoticed? Get elected and move on?"

"Because"—she gave one smart rap on the table—"and here's the beauty of the miserable bastard's plan, this way not only did he have the pleasure of hacking his wife's lover to bits, but he got to prosecute a sensational case and get himself noticed all over the county in a way no amount of ordinary campaigning could have.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

That picture of him holding up the bloody axe; 'political gold' one of the reporters called it.

I nodded. Gold, indeed.

"And"—she rapped so sharply I almost jolted off my chair—"he scared that wife of his so you can bet he never again had to worry about her saying yes to any man. He had her just where he wanted her; probably the first time, too. I'll bet she looked at him with respect like no woman ever had. So you see, Gabriel Haskins won all around. For that, the rest of my life was a small price to pay."

She was smiling now, and I suspected she'd been through these interviews so often she knew the sequence and she was getting poised for the part she enjoyed. And I was into it enough now to share her pleasure as I asked, "But he didn't succeed, did he?"

"He came close. But he didn't count on my neighbors. He hadn't grown up in Linokin, and he just didn't realize that Pennsylvania people don't like an outlander coming into their town and turning on one of their own, a widow lady at that. I wasn't young anymore. And what with the shock of George's death and then the arrest, well, it just about did me in. I was afraid I was going to be planted right there in jail till they planted me in the ground. But my neighbors got together and they bailed me out. How they got the money I don't know. They scrubbed out my house, and when I got home they all came by one by one with casseroles. That was when the family down the road brought me Tinsel to keep me company. They said it pleased them to think I wouldn't be alone in a silent house." She laughed. "No chance of that with that cat. He was part Siamese, with a howl to make your hair stand on end."

"And the trial?"

"Honey, you know all about that. That's public record."

"Well, I mean, after you were found not guilty."

"Ah, yes." She leaned back and took a long, deep, satisfied breath, then she grinned and patted my hand. "Yes, indeed. It was a hard time for Gabriel Miserable Haskins. I'm just sure it never occurred to him that he couldn't railroad an old lady. He never expected every single one of my neighbors to come forward and testify for me. He never figured the police wouldn't find my footsteps in beside George's body. And how he imagined me disposing of the body of a two hundred pound man, even in pieces—Well, the jury just threw up their hands at that."

"He never dreamed you'd be acquitted?" The tickle in my throat I'd been squeezing back erupted into a cough. "Excuse—"

"Where are my manners, hon? You need something to drink." She pushed herself up and rang a buzzer on the wall. "The staff usually brings at least a pitcher of water. But these interviews, well, they unnerve them. 'It's not like Mike Wallace coming out,' I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

say to them, but it does no good. They keep a wary distance." She caught my eye and grinned. "Makes me wonder what crimes they're hiding. But you know what they say: It's hard to get good help these days." She let out a laugh.

My coughs subsided momentarily.

"Oh, good, you're better. We'll get you that water anyway. And some tea. Or, wait, it's moving in on Happy Hour, how about a mint julep? They do them very well down here. We can go on into the lobby now, or better yet, we'll sit out on the veranda and watch the sun set over the ocean."

I swallowed against a new tickle.

"Why not try the julep? The bourbon will calm that throat right down. You can sit yourself here in this chair and drink till sunrise if you want, right? You're staying here at the hotel, aren't you? The boat doesn't leave for the mainland till morning."

I nodded. Why not, indeed? I'd gotten my story, a nothing-special story, but not one where anything special was expected. I'd have to pad it out with the cat.

"Two juleps, Carlos," she told the uniformed waiter. "And water for the lady." She patted my arm. "You'll get over that cough. It's something in the air on the island. It drove me crazy the first couple years I lived here. I'd sit here in the air conditioning all summer, thinking I'd been crazy to take all George's insurance money and what the TV people paid—you see the movie they did on the trial?—and buy myself a hotel on a tiny island in the Caribbean. But the cough fades in the fall, and then I remember how cold it gets in the hollows of Pennsylvania in the winter. How it floods in spring. Then I know I made the right choice."

I followed her into the gray hallway, up the stairs, through a door, and into a lobby with ceiling fans and tropical prints. Her hotel? I hadn't realized she was the owner. It had been enough of a story to think she was living in a Caribbean hotel. But owning it? I couldn't keep from smiling. Well, now I certainly did have my story.

Iris picked up the widest-brimmed sun hat I'd ever seen and swung it in place with a clear ease of practice. The single blue iris on the brim was fresh—I wondered if one of those uniformed men was responsible for replacing her namesake each afternoon. We were only going as far as the veranda, and that was well shaded by this time of afternoon, but she wasn't taking any chances with her silky white skin.

"Whatever became of Gabriel Haskins?" I asked as I settled next to her in a rattan rocker on the veranda. Here there was no view of a plain dirt path like there'd been from the little room in the back of the hotel. Here the sand glistened gold in the afternoon

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sun. Beyond it the ocean sparkled, as blue as Iris McNair's eyes above her insouciant violet lipstick.

The waiter arrived almost immediately, as if to make up for his earlier absence and deposited the drink tray on the little table between us. "Anything else, Mrs. McNair?"

"No, that's all, Carlos." She picked up a glass and clinked it against mine. "Well now, I'll tell you about Gabriel Haskins. He came to my house once after the trial. Just once. After that I never saw him again. Muriel left him about then and people say he lost his mind, small loss as that might have been."

She swallowed long and slow, as if enjoying the liquor of victory the whole way down her body, then shifted to a better vantage point for the sunset. Her sunset. In the process she leaned back, propped her sandaled foot on a rattan stool, and sighed. She reminded me of herself in that old picture after the hurricane, the plucky ex-trailer-dweller saying, "You've got to be ready to move." But now she would never have to move again. Now she wasn't a trailer-dweller; she owned an entire hotel. Now she resembled a cat, its cream bowl emptied, its spot in the sun secure.

I took a long swallow of my mint julep. She was right: My throat felt better; in fact, I felt better all over. I breathed out and felt as if I was melting into the rattan chair. The glass was cool in my hand, the air warm, and a small breeze just beginning to massage my shoulders. I didn't need it for my story, but curiosity made me ask, "And the cat the neighbors gave you, Mrs. McNair, whatever happened to it?"

She turned toward me and stared a moment, as if reassessing the outcome of our game, the one she'd agreed to to alleviate her boredom. "The cat that reminded me of George? Well now, that cat went and got himself killed."

"Oh, I'm sorry. How?"

"Hard to say."

She put her glass down and stared at me from under her lovely sun hat. "If you could believe Gabriel Haskins, he swore I killed it. Yes ma'am, he went racing down the hill into town, babbling like a lunatic to anyone he could find. He said when he came to my door after the trial I looked him right in the eye"—she was looking me in the eye—"that I had a smirk on my face"—there was a smirk on her face right now—"and that I picked up that shiny new hatchet the neighbors gave me to chop kindling and chopped off that tomcat's head."

I coughed so violently I almost missed what she added.

"But of course, after everything that happened, who was going to believe anything Gabriel Haskins said about me?" ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Straight, No Chaser

by Raymond Steiber

I left Goodman because I couldn't take the ray. That was the look he gave you whenever you played something he didn't like or asked for a raise—the "death ray," we called it, and it was worse than anything in a Saturday-afternoon movie serial. Also, Goodman was stuck in a certain groove, and he wouldn't let you hit any new licks.

Thanks to Dinty Logan running his roadster into a stand of Georgia pines when we were on the road with Red Baird's band in '39, I had a busted-up left knee and was 4F. So I didn't have to worry about being called up to fight the Nazis in Europe or the Tojo-loving Japanese in the Pacific. And what with all the other musicians my age getting letters that started with "Greetings!" and ended with them running obstacle courses with M-1 rifles in their mitts, I had all the work I could handle. So, even big as he was, leaving Benny G. didn't hurt my bank account a nickel.

I ended up in L.A., where I did a lot of radio jobs during the day and gigged with Johnny Redmond's Hot Seven nights. Johnny on clarinet, Stuff Moore on baritone sax, and me on trumpet and cornet, with piano, drums, rhythm guitar, and bass. I was making so much dough that I put a down payment on a blue 1940 Lasalle—you couldn't buy anything new during the war—and rode around like a movie star.

The club scene was really swinging then. For the first time in nearly a decade, ordinary people had ready cash in their pockets, and they weren't averse to spending it. Then there were all the

World War II is becoming a popular setting for mysteries. In this issue you'll find two World War II tales, one from each side of the Atlantic. Given the many differences in how the English and Americans experienced the war, it's only to be expected that the stories would be very different in tone and mood. For some, like Raymond Steiber's 4-F trumpet player, the war years were "a swinging place to be." And Mr. Steiber's mystery rollicks! †

©2000 by Raymond Steiber

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

G.I.s, a fresh contingent of them every month, out to have a good time before they got shipped out to the jungles of Guadalcanal or New Guinea.

If you were 4F, though, you had to watch it. Kids headed off for the war were naturally resentful of those who stayed behind, particularly since a number of them—movie stars in particular—had worked some scam to get their deferment. People forget it now, but guys like John Wayne and, later on, Frank Sinatra were thoroughly detested by your average soldier. They didn't like Dick Haymes either for pulling that crap about being an Argentine citizen. So whenever anybody confronted me in a bar, I'd pull up my pants leg and show them my knee brace. That mostly worked, except the one time a guy decked me because he thought I was reaching for a knife in an ankle sheath. Decking's a bad business for a trumpet player. Lose your teeth and you lose your *embouchure* and can't play. So after that I always *told* the guy what I was going to do before I did it.

But it was a swinging place to be, the war years, as long as you weren't getting shot at. And I had some great times and a few scary times. And this one I'm going to tell you about—the one with China Lee and the case of contraband scotch—had a little of both.

It started with Morey Schweitzer. Those days, in L. A., the big hoodlums weren't Irish or Italian, they were Jewish—Mickey Cohen, Bugsy Segal—and Morey Schweitzer was about halfway up the tree. L.A. was different, too. There was a lot more open space. Between downtown and Redondo Beach, there was only one red light, for instance. And places like Cucamonga, hard by the mountains, might just as well have been on the moon.

Morey owned a couple of places on the beach and a club on Sunset with gambling in the back. But his main swot—the sugar that paid the rent—was black-marketeering.

Right here I'd better explain what that was. During the war a lot of things were rationed—gasoline, automobile tires, meat, and so on. To conserve alcohol, they even changed the standard size of a bottle of booze from a quart to a fifth.

Everybody had ration books. You got so many stamps a month. Every time you bought a gallon of gas, for instance, you peeled one off. And when they were all gone, you walked—unless you were a doctor. Doctors still made house calls in those days, and they got an extra allowance.

So supplying black-market meat or gas or tires or alcohol was a sweet racket. Even retreads could bring you big money. And Morey was up to his elbows in it.

I never took meat or gas or tires. I'd have felt like a traitor. But

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

somehow hard liquor was different. Where was it going anyway but some officers' club? Even then I had a Pfc.'s attitude towards officers. I might not've been a Pfc. in the military, but I was sure a Pfc. in civilian life. So when Morey offered me the case of scotch, I didn't say no, I asked where and when.

Morey made the offer in the Spotlight Club between sets. The atmosphere there, like always, consisted of cigarette smoke and the fumes from spilled beer.

We were at the end of the bar. I said: "What's the gimmick, Morey?"

Morey was built like a fire hydrant, short and squat, with a head that looked like you could bend a tire iron over it. He grinned at me. "No gimmick, Rich. Just a favor."

"That's another name for gimmick, Morey."

"You fix me up with China Lee. Not a date or anything. Just get her to have a sit-down drink with me."

"China Lee don't like you."

"That's why I'm willing to let this case of scotch go just to talk to her."

"She'll put her cigarette out in your eye."

"No, she won't. Not if you set it up."

"What kind of offer are you going to make?"

"Who said anything about an offer?"

"That crocodile grin on your face said it."

"I'm a lonely guy. I need companionship."

"You got a wife and kids out in the valley. How lonely's that?"

He got a sad look on his face, as if he were trying to wring some sympathy out of me. "I hardly ever see them, Rich."

"Well, maybe if you'd drive out there once in a while."

He got irritated. "You going to help me with this or not?"

I thought about the case of scotch.

"I'll see what I can do," I said.

I said: "Sit down with him, act like you're listening for ten or fifteen minutes, then tell him you ain't that type of girl and walk off."

"The trouble is, Rich, I *am* that type of girl."

"But only with me—right?"

"Oh, I've been around, Rich."

I didn't want to hear that, because if anybody was ever gone on a female it was me on China. They called her China because she had sort of Chinese eyes—her real first name was Dorothy. Beautiful skin, dark eyes, long black hair with bangs in front.

Johnny had hired her after a tryout because we needed a girl singer out front of the band. She had a small voice, but she knew how to project it with a microphone. It sort of reminded me of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Peggy Lee's when she was in a Lee Wiley mood. She sang behind the beat, which put a relaxed swing on everything, sort of like Lester Young, and she had a way of hitting hard consonants at the end of a phrase that sent shivers up your spine. Bending them, then bringing them home with a solid stroke.

I loved playing Harmon mute behind her on ballads and blowing little open horn riffs on up-tempo tunes. It was a thing we did together, just to please ourselves, while most of the customers out front were all intent on getting blammed or getting something else. Of course, there were a few who were hip enough to stand in front of the bandstand and listen to what you were doing, and those were the ones you really played for.

When we'd finish up, China would whisper something that seems corny now but was like soft fire then. "Daddy, I really dig you."

She said: "All right, I'll talk to the schmo. But you're going to pay for it, Rich."

I didn't like the sound of that, so I asked her how. But her only answer was a kittenish smile.

We had to drive down to the beach to collect the scotch. That was after she'd had her sit-down with Morey—and twisted the knife in me by pretending to enjoy it. Once she even reached across the table and stroked Morey's Piltdown-man cheek. She really had me going nuts. Was she going to take up with this guy? But then she'd left the table and I'd seen the old gangster do a slow burn and I was able to heave a sigh of relief.

The place we were headed was in Venice. Venice is a community that's had its ups and downs. It had started out as a kitschy real-estate development in the twenties or maybe even earlier. By the forties, though, it had pretty much gone downhill. If you wanted to live dirt cheap and still be able to spit in the ocean, it was definitely the place to be. Anyway, Morey had his black-market booze stash there—in an old storefront right off one of the big piers.

I parked the Lasalle in the alley behind the store and climbed out. Morey might not have got what he wanted, but at least he was honorable enough to pay off.

China waited in the car, all snuggled up in her imitation leopard-skin coat. It was November and nearly one A.M., and the fog had rolled in so thick that we'd barely been able to find our way. Not that it would've been easy otherwise. There was a blackout, and at night everybody had to travel with masked headlights.

I knocked on the metal door. The guy who opened it was ugly enough that he would've fit right in with the gargoyles on the facade of a French cathedral. Easy to see why he hadn't been drafted. How'd you like to run into *him* some night on guard duty?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You Hollander?" he croaked.

"You bet I am. Did Morey call you?"

"If he hadn't, I'd be meeting you with hot lead, not a smile."

"Cut the snow, Joe, and let's get to the part where you hand over the hootch."

He had the stuff out already. Four prewar quarts in a cardboard box that still had the Canadian distributor's name printed on it.

"Take it and get out of here. As soon as you're two blocks down the street, forget you ever heard of this place."

"My memory's fading already."

I stowed the carton in the trunk, then slid behind the wheel. China had dozed off, and as I shut the door her eyes came sleepily open. I drove two blocks, stopped beside another alley, and opened the trunk again. I removed the bottles from the telltale carton and stowed them in a laundry bag with some old clothes. Then I ditched the carton beside some garbage cans in the alley. A moment later we were off again and China was cuddling against my shoulder.

"What'd you tell Morey back at the club?" I asked her.

"I told him that he was a dreamboat," she answered drowsily, "but that I liked ugly guys so I was sticking with you."

"He probably feels like a dreamboat when he stands next to the guy who handed me the booze. The guy talked funny, too."

"So do you, lover. So why don't you shut up while Sugar catches some shuteye."

It took forty minutes to get back to our apartment through the fog. China wandered around in a sleepy daze till she encountered the sofa, then curled up on it like a lapdog. Meanwhile, I hid the booze behind the Rice Krispies in the kitchen cabinet. All but one bottle, which I couldn't help sampling. I poured three fingers in a water glass, ran it under my nose like some fancy wine connoisseur, then took a sip. The smokey peat flavor of old Scotland. Either Morey had latched onto the greatest whiskey counterfeiter in North America or this was the real McCoy. My vote was real McCoy.

I had just started my second three fingers when there was a pounding at the door. It was so loud that it even caused China to slit open her eyes, and once she puts her head down, only a 500-pound bomb will do that.

"Haven't you ever heard of the doorbell?" I muttered.

I opened the door on its chain, and there was Big Ugly from Morey's secret booze emporium. It had been ninety minutes since I'd seen him, but I could've easily waited a lifetime.

"You gotta let me in," he croaked.

And like a dummy I did just that.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He pushed on through, spotted China on the couch, sort of drooled a little, then remembered me and spun around.

"We made a mistake. I gotta have that scotch back."

"You better get a stomach pump then."

He stared at me so hard he almost went cross-eyed.

Then he realized something.

"You ain't had time to drink all that booze. So hand it over."

"No dice."

"I'll give you . . . I'll give you twenty-five bucks for it."

"No, you won't."

"Morey's gonna be mad."

China raised up on the couch. "Let him be mad."

"We had a deal," I said, "and he better stick with it. What'd he do? Give us the real stuff instead of the watered-down like he planned?"

"I'll give you fifty. You can't turn down fifty."

I almost couldn't, either, until my eyes fell on the mostly undrunk glass on the side table. That might be the last *real* scotch I drank for the duration of the war. I mean, Nazi subs were sinking the British ships carrying it every hour on the hour. Something else we needed to hang Hitler for when we finally got our hands on him.

"That scotch ain't for sale," I said.

He suddenly clicked on my name. Don't ask me why.

"Hollander. I know you, Hollander. And you ain't getting away with this."

"What nationality are you?" China popped from the couch. "You got a funny accent."

Ugly spun around and pointed a meaty finger. "No, I ain't. And you just better shut up!"

Ugly was starting to get ugly. I began looking around for something to bash him with in case he got physical, too.

He turned back to me. "Okay. You asked for it."

He went to the window and pulled the blackout curtain aside.

China raised up on the couch. "Hey, you idiot, you want to have the block warden down on us?"

There were volunteer block wardens who enforced the blackout. Out in Beverly Hills the German-Jewish director Ernst Lubitsch had held the post, and some woman called the cops and claimed the Germans had landed when he yelled at her in a thick accent for showing a light.

Ugly wasn't yelling, but he was waving his arms in front of the now uncovered window. It must've been the scotch or something because I ran over and grabbed him from behind and wrestled him a[illegible] 've ended up on the floor, and the next thing I knew he had his [illegible]nds around my throat.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

China sat there on the couch, bare-legged and still dopey with sleep.

"Hey," she said, "stop that."

And the funny thing is, I think she meant me.

I got my good knee up and tried to pry Ugly loose with it. But he was too strong for me.

And that was when the blond came through the front door. Not the slinky sort of female blonde that always turns up in Humphrey Bogart movies, but a tall, thin guy with a pistol in his paw.

At first I thought it was the Marines coming to the rescue. I particularly thought that when Ugly let loose of my throat. But it turned out the blond guy was the customer he'd been waving at from the window.

The two of them began jabbering back and forth in a foreign language. China said later that it was Hungarian—though how she knew that I don't know.

Ugly climbed off my chest, then reached down and dragged me to my feet. It didn't seem to take much effort.

The blond guy jabbed the air with his pistol. "Where's the scotch?"

By then I was ready to give it up. I mean, booze may be booze, but it doesn't compensate you for a mangled throat.

"In the kitchen," I managed.

"We'll go in and get it. Lazlo, keep an eye on the woman."

"Don't you call me a woman in that tone of voice," China snapped.

"I call you 'madam' then," Blondie sneered.

He marched me into the kitchen.

"All right, where is it?"

I pointed at the cabinet over the counter.

He didn't like that. Something about the size and shape of the cabinet bothered him. He yanked it open and knocked the Rice Krispies aside and stared at the bottles. Then he rounded on me.

"Where's the rest of it?"

I indicated the open bottle on the counter.

And that was when he gave me an open-handed slap in the chops.

"Hey—watch the *embouchure!*"

"I'll cram your *embouchure* down your throat if you continue to play games with me!"

"That's all the booze I picked up from Morey's place. Every single bottle."

"Do you think I'm interested in bottles?" he screamed.

Then he seemed to get hold of himself. He ran me back into the living room.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He nodded to Lazlo. "Tie these two up."

"With what?"

That proved to be a problem until he discovered a roll of adhesive tape in the bathroom.

"Tape their mouths, too," Blondie ordered.

China's eyes got round. "You better not, you—*mmf hmmph!*"

They left us staring at each other across the room while they tore the place apart. China kept trying to send me messages with her eyes, but unfortunately I'd left my magic decoder ring in my other suit.

Whatever they were looking for, they didn't find it, and Blondie came back into the room fit to be tied. Which was pretty funny since China and I were already tied and fit for nothing.

"We must torture them," he said.

Guess what—I didn't like the sound of that.

"But not here," he added. "There are too many neighbors."

"Where then?" Ugly asked. "The storefront in Venice?"

"Yes. Precisely. They can join their friend Schweitzer there."

So Morey was in the meat grinder, too. Ugly smirked. Maybe worse than the meat grinder, I amended.

They cut the tape on our ankles and marched us downstairs and flung us in the back of a Hudson sedan. Then Ugly covered us with an old horse blanket. It smelled like the horse was still in it.

The Hudson took off. Since neither China nor I could brace ourselves, we rolled all over the place. I kept getting China's knees and elbows and high heels in various tender places on my anatomy.

It was a good long while before the car came to a stop again. I heard the lap of the ocean through the open window and knew we were back on the boardwalk in Venice. Ugly yanked the blanket away. Then he carried China off into Morey's booze emporium. He came back for me a few minutes later. I'd been in the dark so long that the lights of the interior nearly blinded me. And believe me, they were strictly low wattage.

He marched me past stacks of cartons to a door with a frosted-glass window. Then he unlocked the door and shoved me through so hard that I ended up on my rear end.

China was already sitting on the linoleum. And Morey was there, too. The room was an office, and he was sort of draped over a swivel chair. Somebody had used his face to prepare for the big fight, and from the amount of hamburgering they'd done, my money was on them to retain the title. In fact, they'd beat him so hard he wasn't moving anymore.

I swallowed hard. A big-time gangster like Morey—you didn't do something like that to him unless you were *tough*. And how did

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a couple of guys with Hungarian accents come off being *that* tough?

China began *mmf*ing at me from behind the strip of tape on her mouth. She rolled her eyes and bounced up and down on her butt. For a moment I thought she'd lost her marbles. You know how girl band singers are. Then I remembered that she had more than cotton candy in her head and realized she was trying to tell me something.

She twisted herself around so that her back was to me. Then she wiggled her bound hands at me. At last the telegram came through, and I got her message loud and clear.

I turned myself around and we backed into each other. Then we each went to work on the tape that bound the other's wrists. At first we both tried to work at once and our fingers got tangled. Then China whapped me with an elbow, and I let her take the lead.

She got one end of the tape loose and began unwinding it from my wrists. The last few inches ripped a lot a hair loose and I gave a stifled yelp.

I turned around and undid China's hands. Then we both removed the strips of tape from our mouths, me with a stupid jerk that took off a strip of skin and China much more carefully. Of course, she had an advantage over me. She wore lipstick and the tape was only stuck at the edges of her lips.

China said: "We gotta get out of here."

I tried the doorknob. "It's locked."

"Well, what did you think it would be?"

I spotted a big metal wastepaper can beside the desk. "I'll smash the glass out with that, reach through, and unlock the door from the outside. Then we run."

"Good idea."

I grabbed the can. A voice sounded behind me. "Don't . . ."

I whipped around. Morey's tortured mouth was moving. "The sound'll bring 'em back. They'll mow you down."

"You're alive," I yelped.

" 'Course I'm alive. You think a couple of lowlifes could fix a tough old Jew like me?"

"Looks like they made a good start," China said.

"I held out as long as I could," Morey continued, "but when they broke my wrists I had to give it to them."

"Give what to them?" I asked.

"Your address—so they could recover the stuff they gave you by mistake. I really tried. I didn't want them messing up your beautiful face, China, like they already messed up my ugly one."

China said: "Look at the bright side, Morey. Now you got an excuse to get plastic surgery."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"That's something, anyway. If I can stay alive."

"Who are those guys?" I questioned. "Rival gangsters?"

"Are you crazy? They're Nazi spies. Or Nip spies. I don't know which. Freelances that Uncle Sam let in out of the goodness of his heart and now they stab him in the back. And they been operating right under my nose and I never suspected."

"Those guys are foreign agents?"

"They're crumbums. I may be a gangster, Hollander, but I love this country. I bless the day the old man packed up the family on the *stetl* and came here from Russia. Where else could a guy like me steal enough money to make something of himself? And if I can help it, those damned spies aren't going to tramp on the American flag."

"But what do they want with those bottles of scotch?"

"It ain't the scotch, it's the—what's that?"

Noises outside the door.

"Quick," Morey said, "pretend you're still tied and I'll pretend I'm dead."

China and I slapped strips of tape back over our mouths and sat down on the floor with our hands behind our backs. Morey stayed where he was, but he stopped moving his mouth.

The lock on the door clicked. Then the door inched open and Ugly's face appeared. He looked us over real hard.

"I thought I heard talking in here," he accused.

China *mmf*ed at him from behind her tape.

He knitted his brows at her, tried to work something out with his dim brain, gave up on it, and withdrew.

The lock clicked home again.

Being a slow learner, I immediately ripped the tape off my lips and had to bite them to keep from yowling.

"They'll be back soon," Morey croaked. "The blond guy's just cranking himself up with some of my booze. That's what he did with me."

"What'll we do?" China moaned.

"Get the gun out of the ventilator."

"There's a gun in the ventilator?" I asked, astounded.

"That's where I keep my spare. In my business, you got to be prepared."

I turned over the metal wastepaper can and climbed up on my gimpy knee and popped the grille. And sure enough, there was a pistol tucked away in there—a snub-nosed thirty-eight.

"I woulda got it myself, but with my wrists broke I'm helpless."

I swung out the cylinder. "It ain't loaded."

"Think I'd keep a loaded gun in a *heat* duct? What if it got hot enough to set off a round? I'd be sitting at this desk and suddenly end up with a hole in my head."

"But that makes this just a club."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"The bullets are in the left-hand bottom drawer of the desk. In a box marked 'paper clips.'"

I got them out and began filling the slots in the cylinder.

"You gotta get the drop on them," Morey warned, "and that won't be easy."

"Give *me* the gun then," China said. *"I'll* get the drop on them."

"You?" I belched.

"They'll grab you first, Rich. They always grab the weak link."

"Now wait a minute—"

"And while they're getting ready to work you over, the frightened little frail in the corner's gonna whip out her thirty-eight and scare the *cojones* off them."

"China's not only good-looking," Morey opined, "she's smart, too."

"Damned right," she agreed. "And I'm the best little songbird in L.A., too."

Well, she was—at least for my money.

"All right," I said, "but don't wait till they've gouged out a couple of my eyeballs before you drill them."

China grabbed the gun as if it were a microphone and she was about to make sweet music with it.

"Now what's all this business about the scotch?" I asked Morey again.

"I told you. It's not the scotch. It's—"

The door again. Like Morey had just given it a cue line. And we weren't even ready.

I slapped a piece of tape over China's mouth. She slapped a piece of tape over mine. We both sat down with our hands behind us and our backs to the wall, China gripping the thirty-eight, of course. The tape on my mouth had been around awhile now. It tasted like the well-trod floor of a tavern.

Blondie and Ugly burst in. Blondie's eyes were bright and his face was flushed. He'd been hitting the booze all right.

He focused his eyes on me and China.

"You'll tell me now, you two. And if you resist, no one will hear your screams."

He had one hand behind his back. Now he brought it out front and showed us what he had. A pair of pliers.

His eyes froze on me.

"I know about trumpet players and their teeth. In the Old Country my father was a bandmaster."

I gulped in spite of myself. No teeth, no profession.

He pointed the pliers at me.

"Him, Lazlo."

Ugly grabbed my shirt front and yanked me to my feet.

Then he ripped the tape off my mouth. Was I going to have any lip left at all?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He got me in a bear hug from behind. He didn't seem to notice that my hands were loose. Not that it mattered. The way he was gripping me I couldn't use them anyway.

Blondie stepped forward with the pliers. I suddenly realized something—that we were blocking off China and that she couldn't drill either of them without drilling me.

China went *mmf, mmf.* She'd forgotten about the tape.

"Pull his lips apart."

Ugly's brute hand went to my mouth and peeled it open.

"Now tell me or I take the first tooth. *Where is it?"*

Mmf, mmf from China.

"Phwhat?" I managed through Ugly's hand.

"The cardboard box, you idiot! The one the scotch came in!"

"Huh?"

It was all I could manage.

Mmf, mmf. Then a ripping sound as China tore the tape away with her free hand. Then a yelp at the pain. Then her voice, loud and clear.

"Hold it right there, you apes, or I'll air-condition the both of you!"

Ugly jerked his head around. China whapped him in the side of the face with the thirty-eight. His hands fell away. I dove at Blondie, mad as hell at what he'd intended to do to my teeth.

He kneed me before I could get a grip on him, then dove through the door, yanking his pistol out as he did. He blasted a shot at us, and we all hit the floor where Ugly was already occupying half the space.

He raised his head as a second shot smashed into the wall behind us. China whapped him again with the thirty-eight, and that was it for him.

Things went eerily quiet.

A sinister laugh from out in the warehouse.

"He's up to something," Morey croaked from his chair.

Pretty obvious—but what?

Then we heard bottles begin to break.

Even beat-up as he was, Morey was outraged. "The bastard's destroying my stock. Wait'll I get my hands on him!"

"I think it's worse than that," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"He's lit some kind of torch out there."

Blondie began screaming at us.

"Come out with your hands up or I burn the place!"

All that alcohol out there. I know alcohol has to be 100 proof to burn—around 50 percent by weight. But see what happens if you torch a warehouse full of whiskey. The water steams off, the booze reaches the flammable stage, and goodbye warehouse. Goodbye us, too, it looked like.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You think I'm bluffing?" Blondie called. "I'll show you who's bluffing."

Then he set the first fire.

"He's trying to force us out of the office so he can gun us down," I said.

"How's he get the cardboard box that way?" China wanted to know.

Morey supplied the answer. "He don't care anymore. He just don't want us telling the cops he's a spy."

The fire was going pretty good out there. I wondered which would burn first, my knee brace or my knee.

Morey was a big-time gangster. He was used to taking command. "Here's what we're gonna do," he said. "This chair has casters. You sit that metal wastepaper can in my lap for cover. Then we push on out of here with you two right behind blazing away with the thirty-eight."

"What about Ugly here?" I asked

"Let him learn his own dance routine."

China said: "We can't do that, Mr. Schweitzer." Suddenly it was "mister." "That'd make Rich and me murderers."

"All right—sit him in my lap, sit the wastepaper can in *his* lap, and let's get cracking."

Morey's mac was hanging from a hall tree. I ripped the belt out of it and fixed Ugly to Morey's lap by looping the belt around him and then through the chair arms. Then we used all the tape that was lying around to mount the wastepaper can in Ugly's lap. And all the time we were doing it, Morey kept urging us to hurry because the blaze wasn't getting any smaller. In fact, bottles of booze were beginning to explode.

Finally we had something that looked like a miniature tank.

Morey said: "Bombs away!"

I got behind the chair and pushed it through the door, and China brought up the rear with the thirty-eight. We hotfooted it down a lane between two stacks of blazing whiskey cartons. At the end of the lane we'd have to make a sharp left turn to get out of the building. I was scared out of my pickle, but Morey was shouting inappropriate nonsense like *Banzai!* Behind me I heard China muttering prayers. Anyway, she used the name Jesus a lot.

We charged down the lane. The sharp left turn was coming up. All at once, Blondie stepped from behind the stack of cartons at the end and took aim at us with his pistol. The first shot whanged off the wastepaper can. The second shot drilled Ugly in the shoulder. And the third and fourth shots, when they finally came, would take care of the rest of us. In that shooting gallery he couldn't miss.

That's when I got my one and only bright idea of the night. I swung the back of the chair to the left and rammed our makeshift

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tank into the stack of cartons on the right. Morey yowled as we hit. I felt like yowling myself. The stack shivered, then cascaded down on top of Blondie and buried him.

There was just enough space to get us through. I skidded the tank around to the left, ran the casters over the top of Blondie's outstretched ankle, and raced toward the outer door. A split second later, the three of us—four if you counted the moaning Ugly—plunged out into the cool night air. I wheeled us a safe distance out on the pier, then whipped the tank around so we could look back the way we had come.

The storefront was a mass of flames. You could hear bottles exploding like artillery shells. We dumped the wastepaper can and stretched Ugly out on the boardwalk.

Morey stared at the fire, and tears ran down his cheeks.

"All that booze going up in smoke."

When he put it that way, I felt like crying myself.

We recovered the cardboard box from the alley where I'd dumped it. There were cleverly disguised slits in the sides, and inside the slits a bunch of photographs of blueprints. The blueprints had the name Hughes Aircraft emblazoned on them and also a lot of top-secret stamps.

The blueprints were for an experimental seaplane Howard Hughes was developing for the War Department. We felt pretty proud that we'd kept them out of enemy hands. It wasn't till years later—after the war, in fact—that we learned that the *Spruce Goose,* to give the plane its popular name, was the biggest boondoggle of the war. It cost millions and flew only once, and then only for a few minutes.

If the Nips had got their hands on those plans, it would've set them back ten years. Same for the Nazis—if they were in on the deal. We never did find out, by the way. And if the FBI ever found out, they never told us.

As to what happened to us after the war: Like all good gangsters, Morey ended up leading the high life in a minimum-security prison. And me, I continued to play trumpet into old age and still noodle around today. That's me you hear behind the singers on all those Capitol records of the fifties and sixties—when it isn't Jack Sheldon, of course.

That leaves China. Like a lot of girl singers, she got pregnant and got out of the business. She's still around, though. That old guy you see driving her over to see her great-grandkids, the one with the cane and the bald head, that's me. And the great-grandkids are part mine, too.

Some things work out, you know, even for lovelorn trumpet players with gimpy knees. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art by Allen Davis

THREE NIL

by Mat Coward

Along with two billion other people, I was watching the biggest sporting event in TV history, the final match of the 1998 FIFA World Cup. France had just scored their second goal against Brazil (the defending champions, red-hot favourites, and the world's greatest soccer-playing nation), when my doorbell rang.

Of course, not all two billion were watching the match in my microscopic north London flat. I don't know where the rest of them were—here and there about the globe, I'd guess—but at my place there were just three of us, and two of them were ostentatiously not responding to the summons of the bell.

So: Not only was it my flat, my TV, my beer, and my crisps—looked like it was my turn to answer the door, too.

"Don't let anyone score while I'm away," I told my guests, and went to discover what sort of person rings your doorbell while two billion other people are watching the biggest sporting event in TV history. A rugby fan? A North American? A North American rugby fan?

©2000 by Mat Coward

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Good guess, as it transpired. At least, I couldn't instantly intuit the level of her devotion to rugby, but the woman standing on my step was clearly North American. Even if I hadn't heard her accent before I'd finished opening the door, her huge white teeth would have given her away.

"Are you Charlie?" she said. "The cat detective?"

I admitted it. I trade under the name *Charlie WFYC*—Will Find Your Cat. That's what I do for a living: I find lost cats, in the suburbs north of London, for money. It's what you could call a niche market. Or it's what you could call a desperate way to pay the rent, depending on how you feel about euphemisms.

"About five years ago my girlfriend and I adopted two tabby sisters from an animal shelter. The first night we had them, one of them escaped through a *locked* cat flap," Mat Coward told *EQMM*. "She was missing for a month. Eventually, we made contact with a 'cat lady'—a middle-aged woman who, at night, instead of sleeping, went searching for lost cats. This wonderful woman got our cat back for us, and I thought—what a great idea for fiction!"

"I am Charlie," I said. "I am the finder of cats. But at the moment I'm watching the football, along with two billion other people, so perhaps—"

"Right," she said. "Follow me." And with that she turned and began ascending the stone steps that lead from my dilapidated basement bedsit to the dilapidated street on which it rots. She didn't look back.

Well, I stopped taking direct orders from women when I was fifteen, and then again when I was thirty, so I didn't follow her. I went back into my room to drink some more beer and continue enjoying the rare spectacle of Brazil getting stuffed at footie by a nation of cyclists. But I left the front door open in case she chose to return. I hadn't had a paying client all month. I couldn't afford to appear too unwelcoming.

The game finished three-nil, with Brazil taking the nil part, and Paris erupted into what was, according to the newsmen, a bigger street party than that which marked the end of World War Two. You don't see something like that every day of the week, and I pitied the big-toothed American woman for having missed it. What would she tell her grandchildren in years to come, when they asked "Where were you the day Brazil got done over by France, Granny?"

Well, yes, possibly she'd tell them, *"I was trying to get some help*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

finding my cat from a guy who advertised his services as a cat finder, honey. Only he didn't want to know, the cold-hearted bastard."

Well, yes, possibly.

"I've got to pop out," I told my guests—who by now were starting to act more like lodgers. "Make yourselves a nice cup of tea, if you fancy one." That got a few laughs, at least.

I wasn't really looking for the woman. I needed fresh air, some cigarette papers, and some pizza, anyway, so I thought while I was out I might as well have a quick butcher's up and down the street, round the block, and in the nearest pub. Just in case.

First thing I did when I came out of the door was trip over a large rockery stone, apparently laid upon my step for that precise purpose. I wasn't as upset as I might have been, though, because the stone was acting as a paperweight for a fifty-pound note. You ever seen a fifty-pound note? Nice design. I especially like the part where it says "Fifty Pounds."

Written along the edge of the banknote, in red felt-tip, was the message: "Want more? Find me. Where? You're the detective."

I walked up as far as the main road, keeping my eyes open for an American female, my sort of age, large teeth, expensive sunglasses, dyed red hair, slim (by British standards, I mean; by American standards, downright skeletal), carrying a black leather attaché case. I didn't see her. I had a quick look in the pub, and a squint through the window of the cafe. She wasn't there. I picked up my smokes and my pizza, and walked home by a different route. Still didn't spot her.

Fifty pounds, and the promise of more. I decided to go and fetch my car, extend the area of the search. She wanted to be found, after all: She had to be somewhere.

I got back to my place and there she was, sitting next to the money-stone, right there on my step.

She was quite good-looking, if you go for the all teeth and bones look, and, frankly, it's a long time since I could afford to be fussy. Even so, she was beginning to irritate me. I sat down next to her, got my notebook out of my pocket, and said, "Let's start with a description of the missing cat."

"No, let's start with you giving me my fifty pounds back."

Now I was irritated. "Why should I give you the money back?"

"Because it was an advance on your fee for finding me. You didn't find me. I was here all the time." She pointed towards a tumble-down, roofless wooden shack which hid the communal dustbins (from sight, though rarely from smell). "I was right over there."

"Then you hired me under false pretences," I said. But I gave her the money anyway. I suppose I'd known all along that that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fifty-quid note had "Too Good to Be True" written all over it, in red felt-tip.

She put the money in her rear jeans pocket, then stood up and brushed the brick dust off her backside. "My name's Marie," she said. "Can we talk in your office?"

I lit a cigarette. "We are doing," I said.

"Oh, I see. Classy operation, huh?" Marie chuckled. From the sound her throat made I guessed she was a smoker, but if she wanted a smoke now, she could have one of her own. "Okay," she said, still standing. I stood up too, because it seemed like the polite thing to do. And because my bum had gone to sleep on the stone. It's not as young as it used to be, that bum of mine.

Marie reached round to her back pocket and brought out the (by now legendary) fifty-pound note. Then she dug in one of her front pockets and came up with its twin. She held them both out to me. I just about stopped myself from kissing them. "This is a retainer, okay?" said Marie.

I tucked the hundred away, somewhere deep within the folds of my poverty. "Okay. So what's the cat's name?"

"Venus Arisen."

"Venus Arisen?" I wrote it down. "That's a pity."

For the first time since we'd met, Marie looked a little unsure. "A pity? Why?"

One of the worst parts of this job is having to be polite to annoying people. Since it's one of the worst parts, I rarely bother with it. "A pity to give a cat such a bloody stupid name," I explained. "How long's she been missing?"

"*He.* I don't believe in gender-restricted names. And he's *not* missing." She showed me an unpleasantly, if appropriately, feline smile, designed to prove that she was back in control of the conversation after a brief derailment.

What she didn't know was—well, she didn't know me. She didn't know that, with one hundred pounds of her money in my pocket, I really couldn't care less what silly games she wanted to play. "So you know where the cat is?"

"I know where the cat is."

"And you want me to get it back for you?"

"Nope."

"You don't want me to get the cat back for you?"

She shook her head loosely from side to side. Frankly, it was not what I would consider a very grown-up gesture. "What I want you to do is, I want you to find out where the cat is."

Oh, *right.* A loony. No problem. Far as I'm concerned, you can be as loony as you like, just as long as you're paying. Like, in advance. "Well," I said, cheerfully, "that should be simple enough."

"Oh yes?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Sure. I'll ask you where the cat is. You tell me. Then I'll tell you, and you can pay me. Yes, that ought to work. Though it leaves unresolved the question of what I'm going to do with my evenings now the World Cup's over."

She burst into tears. I mean, she *exploded* into tears, like an Iraqi water-cooler hit by an underachieving smart bomb. "You're not taking this seriously!"

Now, that hurt. How could she say such a thing about me? This woman had given me one hundred pounds and implied that there was more to come. And she thought I wasn't taking her seriously?

"Madam," I informed her, "I can assure you I take this matter most seriously and will endeavour to deliver complete satisfaction in whatever mission with which you see fit with which to charge me with. How many withs was that?"

She dabbed at her tears with her sleeve. "I don't know. I lost count."

"The thing is, I need to get all the facts straight in my head." Even if they're not straight in *your* screwy nut, I could have added. But didn't, obviously. "So, tell me the whole story, will you?"

"Okay." She sniffed up the last of the tears. "My ex-partner, that is, my ex-boyfriend, he has the cat."

"Ah-ha. Now we're getting to the heart of the doughnut."

"You're really not very good at that, you know?"

"At what?"

"That wisecracking banter stuff. It's not your forte."

"Listen," I said, impatience beginning to win out over greed once again, which has always been one of my most perilous failings. "I find cats, like it says on my card. You want banter, you should . . ."

She waited. I dot-dot-dotted. Eventually she said, "I should what?"

"Hire a banter specialist," I mumbled.

"See what I mean? Not your forte. Lim has the cat. It's my cat, I've had it for years, ever since I came to this country, but he won't give it back. Now, for reasons I don't choose to share with you, so don't bother asking, I don't wish Lim to know that I know that he has the cat. Okay? So I want you to 'find' the cat, report back to me, then I can confront Lim with your report and demand return of my property. Namely, one cat."

Reasons she didn't choose to share—that'd be female pride, I reckoned. "I don't usually do custody battles," I said. "Too messy."

Marie shook her head. "It's nothing like that. Lim has no claim on the cat, believe me."

"All right," I said. "But I come back to my earlier point—you tell me where the cat is, and I'll—"

"No way!" She reacted as if I'd made an indecent suggestion.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'm from the States, pal. The land of the proactive consumer. You think I'm going to pay you for doing nothing, you think again."

Counting slowly to ten, and then even more slowly to twenty, I rolled, lit, and smoked a cigarette. It was important that I ignored the loonier aspects of this case and focused on the essentials. That's right—the money. If she wanted to pay me to locate a non-missing cat, that was fine. No one has ever accused me of putting job satisfaction or professional dignity ahead of paying the bills.

"You understand that I charge a daily rate?"

She nodded.

"All right, then. Will you at least tell me where the cat went missing from?"

Marie took an envelope out of her attaché case. "In here, you'll find a photo of the cat, the address of the apartment where the cat was stolen from, and the keys to that apartment."

I took the envelope and rattled it. "Can I contact you at this address?"

"No, I'm not there anymore. And before you ask, I don't choose to tell you my current address."

Another slow ten, another slow twenty. A prayer of thanks for nicotine. "That's going to make it hard for me to contact you, Marie."

"I'll contact you," she said.

I'd had enough arguing with foreign maniacs for one day, so all I said was: "Right. Gotcha. You're the boss."

The flat was a two-bedroom place in a moderately prosperous dormitory street near Kentish Town tube station, and although it was fully furnished, right down to a box of tea bags in the kitchen, the unmistakable aroma of human occupation was entirely absent.

This was, undoubtedly, rented accommodation resting between tenants. I knew the type: In my younger days, I'd squatted plenty such, armed only with a paperback guide to property laws, a portable record player, and a couple of Stones LPs. Of course, this was back before I never got married, when I was a young man, before I became a bachelor.

I sat on the naked mattress in the main bedroom, its pillows and blankets piled at one end, and looked down at my unnecessarily soft midriff, and past that to my almost pretentiously scuffed brown shoes, and I thought about how far I hadn't come in thirty years. I still lived in the same kind of places now—difference was, these days I paid rent, like any other mug.

Not to mention that, to my own daily astonishment, I'd turned out to be not a legendary bluesman but a cat finder.

I lifted my gaze off the floor with the kind of effort an Olympian weightlifter uses when he feels the chalk on his palms begin to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the sweat, and let it rest instead on what was clearly rner. A piece of plastic sheeting lay across a square yard et, and upon it stood a food bowl, a water bowl, a dirt tray, a scoop, a box of dry food, and—

nd it was all brand new. Unused. Just to make sure, I went over and sniffed the tray. Definitely: Not the faintest whiff of mog. This flat wasn't a cat's previous address. This was a cat's *next* address.

I picked my knees up off the floor and carried them back over to the bed. I sat down, rolled up a roll-up, and while I smoked it I thought.

Mine is generally a pretty simple line of work, not involving too many brilliant feats of detection. What usually happens is, people's cats wander a bit beyond their territory, get lost, panic, and go feral. They rarely run far, and I've yet to encounter one that has bothered with false documents or reconstructive facial surgery. The only truly essential talents required of a cat finder are, in reverse order of importance, low cunning, a high boredom threshold, and exceptional bladder control.

But this . . . this was clearly something a little odd. Weird, even. And so was my client, Mad Marie.

As I've already implied, I have no particular objection to taking money off mad people. Not wishing to sound cynical (whilst at the same time not giving a damn whether I do or not), I have to make a living. Everyone has to make a living, after all, except archbishops, members of the House of Lords, and whoever's in charge of quality control on the privatised railways. Besides, loopy Americans have just as much right to the services of a cat finder as does anyone else. It would be discriminatory of me to refuse Marie's dosh.

That wasn't my problem. My problem was that despite, on all the evidence, being as crazy as a wasp in a jar full of glue fumes, Marie was solidly in control of this daft game—or whatever it was. That made me uncomfortable.

It wasn't until I was at home in bed that night, failing to sleep, that the very obvious solution finally entered my non-detective's head. Don't follow an invisible cat; follow the client. Brilliant! Obvious, but brilliant.

(The reason I couldn't sleep, by the way, was that every time my eyelids began to droop, I would spring back awake, thinking: *I sniff cat trays. For a living. Meanwhile, Howlin' Wolf doesn't even know I exist.)*

"Ah, Marie, I'm glad you phoned. I have what is known in the argot of the detecting racket as a Hot Lead."

"Oh, you do?"

"Oh, I do."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Oh." There was a pause, during which I could hear her tongue clicking thoughtfully against her big, shiny gnashers. "Okay. Great. You want to tell me what it is?"

"Not over the phone."

"I see. You are what is known in the argot of the psychiatric racket as A Touch Paranoid."

"Quite possibly. Either way, I'd like to deliver my report face-to-teeth."

"I beg your pardon?"

I shook the telephone and made sizzling noises into the mouthpiece. "Face," I said. "Face-to-face. There's a pub in Harrow called the Load of Hay. Will you meet me there tonight at eight-thirty?"

Another pause, more clicking. "Well . . . yeah, I guess."

"Great. I'll wear a carnation so you'll recognise me."

"Huh? We've already met."

"Badinage, Marie. Mere banter."

There was a Country and Western night happening at the pub. People have to make their own entertainment in the suburbs, I understand that, it's just a pity that most of them are so bad at it. I have nothing against Country and Western music, provided I don't have to listen to it, but there is something about the sight of middle-aged British suburban folk wearing cowboy clothes and calling each other "Pardner" that I find mildly irritating. If I were ever to visit Montana and discover the pubs there full of middle-aged American suburban folk dressed as Morris Dancers and calling each other "Mate," I would probably react with precisely the same degree of nose-wrinkling distaste.

Or else wet myself laughing, one or the other.

I did a quick tour of the pub, weaving between the bogus cowpersons, who were getting outside some beer in preparation for an evening spent steppin' out to the down-home sounds of Willie Wyoming and His Western Wildmen. I'd arrived early for our rendezvous, and I wanted to make sure that Marie hadn't arrived even earlier. It was pretty packed, I wasn't as slim as my elusive client, and as I squeezed past a corner table my hip caught a pint of lager, sloshing its contents onto the lap of a man wearing cowboy clothes several sizes too small for him. He was big and round. Rounder than a pig with a pig inside it. When he spoke it was with a deep, rough Glasgow accent.

"You got a problem, pal?"

"Yeah," I said. "My best friend done run off with my dawg."

To my great relief he laughed at that, slapped me on the back, and said "Yee-haw." I returned the salutation, and returned to my car, parked a few yards away, with a clear view of the pub car park.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She arrived soon after, in a maroon Escort even more clapped-out than my own ancient chariot. She drove it as if it was on fire.

I gave her a moment to get settled, then I phoned the pub on my mobile. It took awhile to make the barman understand my request over the noise of the fiddles and the banjos, but eventually Marie came to the phone.

"Yee-haw, Charlie," she said, her tone weary.

I almost yee-hawed her back, then remembered that I wasn't supposed to know what was going on at the pub. "Hi, Marie. Look, I'm sorry about this, but I can't meet you after all. This red-hot lead? It's suddenly gone critical. I have to chase it before it burns out. Ring me tomorrow, okay? I should have more news for you then."

I hung up before she could ask any questions. I think that annoyed her: She came out of the pub immediately, muttering to herself, probably about the unreliability of men in general and cat finders in particular. Her tyres sprayed gravel over late-arriving cowpersons as she exited the car park at speed. I followed, a little more sedately.

We ended up in Wembley, where she pulled up outside a small, seriously grotty bungalow, in a street that was more ghostly than quiet. I parked my tin can behind a big van and watched as she fished around in her attaché case for the door key.

She went in. I sat in the car, smoking and telling myself that I still had the bladder control of a man twenty years my junior. By way of distraction, I took out the photo she'd given me of the non-missing cat, a fluffy, all-white youngster, and looked at it properly for the first time. Then, for no particular reason beyond boredom, I turned the photo over and read the processing date stamped on the back.

Well now, I thought. That's curious.

Marie came out, got back in her car, and zoomed off again. I let her go. Somewhere in that house, I hoped, I would find the address of Lim, the ex-boyfriend. Looking at the tatty shack, I was confident that it wouldn't be too difficult to get into.

It wasn't. When I knocked on the door, just to make sure that nobody was at home, it turned out that somebody was at home. His teeth were smaller than Marie's but his muscles were much bigger.

"Ah," I said, "you must be the ex-boyfriend." But what was he doing at Marie's place?

"I'm Lim," he said, his accent Yorkshire. "Nothing ex about me, pal. How about you?"

I stood there, staring into space, with my mouth open. I can't help it, it's what I look like when I'm thinking. Marie had told me that she'd had the cat for years—"ever since I came to this country."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But the cat in the photo wasn't more than two or three years old. And the date stamp on the reverse of the print was from last month.

Stealing pets for ransom isn't an uncommon crime these days, according to the newspapers. My guess had been that Marie and Lim were amateur catnappers who'd fallen out over the spoils.

But if Lim was still here, it didn't look like they'd fallen very far.

Lim seemed to take my silence on his doorstep as an insult. "Tell you what," he said. "I think I'll hit you."

I couldn't think of anything to defend myself with other than my business card.

"'Will Find Your Cat?' Jesus," he said. "The old bag hired a detective?" He laughed. "You better come in, pal."

I took a step forward, and Lim pushed me hard in the chest. While I was busy falling over, he scarpered out of the kitchen door and away over the back fence. That was fine with me. I rarely chase people, and never if they're running.

In a large cage, which dominated the cramped, underfurnished living room, I found Venus Arisen—white, young, and fluffy. See? Told you I was a cat finder.

A disc hanging from his collar was inscribed with his phone number, but before I had a chance to ring it, Marie came in, looked at me, and said, "Hell's bells."

"If you run, I won't chase you," I said. "I'll just sit here and wait until you get back."

She dropped down onto a sofa with a big *whump* and lit a cigarette. She made a big production out of not offering me one. Petty.

"Is the cat all right?"

"Don't worry," I said. "The cat's fine."

"Pity," she said, on a stream of blue smoke. "I was hoping Lim had used it to hit you with. I can't stand cats. Lim's gone, I guess?"

"You just missed him." I sat down on the smelly sofa, between her and the door. Just in case. I tried to think of a bit of banter to cheer us both up, but nothing came to mind. I settled for, "Tell me the story, Marie."

She did, in a quiet, depressingly sane voice. It took me awhile to realise she was crying, she made so little of it.

Lim and Marie wanted to get married. They got a flat sorted out—the one with the all-new litter tray which I'd visited the previous day—but then Lim lost his job, and Marie was *damned if she was going to pay for everything,* so they came up with the catnapping plan. Simple. But no sooner had they installed Venus Arisen in his temporary quarters, when Marie met someone else.

"Someone richer," I guessed.

"What? I'm supposed to apologise for having self-worth?" She wiped her nose on her sleeve. "This country, really! The only time you see *ambition* is on a Scrabble board."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Simply walking out on Lim was, apparently, not an option. "The man is possessive. A fat old milksop of a cat finder like you, no offence intended, Charlie, could not even begin to visualise what I mean when I say that he is possessive."

"Slightly lumpy," I said. "Not fat." I might have objected to milksop, too, but I wasn't a hundred percent sure what it meant, and I didn't want to make a fool of myself by objecting to a compliment.

"I knew I had to shake Lim off good and proper, but I couldn't think of a way. Then I saw your stupid advert on a postcard in a launderette window."

"Can you remember which launderette? It'd be a great help for my marketing strategy."

"I convinced Lim that we shouldn't move the cat to the new flat yet, in case we were seen. And then I hired you. You thought I was crazy, didn't you? See, that's what I wanted you to think—I didn't want you taking the job too seriously."

"Yes, Marie," I said. "You give great crazy."

Her entire plan might have served as evidence of her craziness—except that it worked. She assumed that I would stake out the new flat, since it was the only address I had. She assumed this because she assumed that I was cheap, lazy, dishonest, unimaginative, and slightly lumpy, and not a proper detective. That annoyed me: I have never *claimed* to be a proper detective.

Due to my incompetence, Lim would be sure to spot me (he was over there several times a week, making sure the love nest didn't fall to squatters) and assume that I was either a cop or a private eye. Why would he assume that?

She laughed out a cough of smoke. "Let's just say that dear Lim has had his ups and downs in life. He might look like Mr. Clean—"

"He doesn't," I said.

"Well, even if he did, it would be an inaccurate image. Believe me, I know this: If he sees a cop, real or imaginary, he runs." She looked me up and down, ran her tongue over her big teeth awhile, and laughed again. "Bet he's the first person ever to run from a cat finder, though."

"From what you say, isn't he the type to come looking for you, when he thinks it's safe to return?"

"Probably. But I'd be gone."

I sat for a moment, thinking it through. "And the reason you gave me the address of the new flat, instead of this place, was you didn't want to risk me actually finding the cat. You were still planning to go ahead with the ransom, minus the inconvenience of your ex-partner."

"Well—right," she said, and I could see from her amused eyes that there was something else there, some game yet unfinished. She saw that I knew and spoke quickly to cover the moment. "I hadn't

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

counted on you tailing me. For God's sake, you're lousy at banter, I made sure of that, and I assumed you'd be lousy at all the other detective skills, too. I mean, finding cats—how hard can that be?"

Bloody cheek! "I'd like to see you do it," I said.

"Oh, please! I went to school—finding cats, that's a career for someone who was raised by chimps."

I was still wondering what it was that she wasn't telling me. "You don't look all that happy, Marie. Seeing as you're free of Lim, which was the whole point."

She sighed. "Yeah, I got rid of Lim, all right. But the other guy . . ."

"Ah," I said. "He went back to his wife."

"Still," said Marie, suddenly all business, "you are right—you did what I hired you to do, even if it wasn't quite how I planned, and even if you didn't know you were doing it. So I owe you for your time. My money's in the car. I'll just go get it. Okay?"

She stood up, but she couldn't easily get to the door without me moving my outstretched legs. Our eyes met, and I found myself thinking, *Well, we all make mistakes,* so I decided to make one of my own.

"Sure," I said, folding my legs up. "You go and get the money. I'll wait here."

Marie nodded, smiled a little bit, and slipped away. She drove off quietly—almost like a mark of respect.

I'm no vet, but Venus Arisen didn't seem to have suffered much from his imprisonment. His white fur was white, his eyes were bright, his yowling was louder than a chain saw, and he gave me a few decent scratches as I bundled him into a carrying case.

I leant against the car, with the cat box in one hand and my mobile phone in the other, and dialled the number from Venus's identity collar. Venus carried on yowling.

"*Whitey?* Whitey—is that you?"

An elderly woman, with a posh voice, threadbare clothes, and milky eyes came tottering out of the bungalow next to Marie's. She looked in my direction but didn't seem to see me, so I walked towards her.

"You've found my cat! Oh, God bless you, you've brought my Whitey back! Please—can you bring him in? My phone's ringing."

I switched off the mobile.

"Oh," said the old woman as she reached her front door. "It seems to have stopped."

I put the mobile in my pocket, thinking: *Whitey?*

I followed the woman into her house, thinking: *Next door.* They stole the cat from their next-door neighbour. That was the bit

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Marie hadn't told me. That was her final game. That and the damn stupid name.

I closed the door behind me, put the cat box down, and opened it. Whitey disappeared in the direction of the kitchen.

His owner started asking me who I was, and how, and why, and where, so I gave her one of my cards. She stared at it for a while and then said, "What does it say, young man? I'm afraid my eyes . . . cataracts, you know."

For a brief mad moment, it struck me that I could tell her anything I liked. "The bearer of this card is the Prince of Wales. Please give him all your silver and a large chocolate cake."

Instead, I said, "My name's Charlie. I find lost cats."

"Charlie? Charlie WFYC? But I was going to call you! I was, my niece saw your advertisement in a newsagent's window. She wrote down the number for me, but—"

"But your eyes," I guessed. "Cataracts."

"I *didn't* hire you, did I?" she said, squinting up at me.

"No," I sighed.

"Oh dear. I can't very well pay you for bringing him back then, can I? If you weren't working for me."

"No," I sighed.

"Still, it wouldn't be right to let you go empty-handed. Wait there, please, young man."

A tip, I thought. Well, that went with the posh voice—paying tips instead of wages.

She scuttled off to the kitchen and came back a minute or so later carrying a jar of homemade gooseberry jam. I knew it was homemade, and gooseberry, because it said so on the label. "Homemade Gooseberry Jam, 1991." The cellophane cover had come loose and there was grey mould around the edge of the jar.

"There," she said, pressing it into my hands reverently. "Fair exchange is no robbery, isn't that right?"

"No," I sighed. "Or yes. Or whatever." I saw myself out.

On a lamppost next to my car there hung a rubbish bin. I put the jam into it and got into my car. As I fiddled with my seat belt, I saw in my wing mirror a flash of white fur scooting across the road and up and over a tall fence. Through the open driver's window, I heard a posh voice calling, "Oh no, he's got out again! Oh please, young man, I say—I say, don't go! Young man, could you possibly . . ."

I decided I had cataracts of the ears, closed the window, and drove home.

It was all rather sad, really, because I like jam, and I like money, and on this job I'd got no money—twice—and the only jam I'd been offered was inedible.

Life versus Charlie: three-nil to Life. I demand a rematch. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Summer People

by Brendan DuBois

Just announced: Brendan DuBois is the winner of the 1999 Sidewise Award, founded in 1995 to recognize excellence in the writing of alternate histories. Presented at Chicon, the 58th World Science Fiction Convention, the award honors his book *Resurrection Day*, a thriller based on the supposition that JFK was not killed in Dallas. The novel will be available in paperback from Jove Books in October. ¶

The drive north from Massachusetts had taken the better part of three hours, and the first half-hour of the journey was still with Roy Toland as a dull ache continued between his shoulder blades. Those thirty minutes had been spent in bumper-to-bumper traffic, snarling along Storrow Drive in Boston, the air conditioner in their Jeep Cherokee struggling valiantly to keep things cool and comfortable in the hundred-degree weather. Twice people had cut him off—one in a Volvo that had a bumper sticker that said VISUAL WORLD PEACE—and since he and his wife were officially on vacation, Roy let both drivers live.

Now, bouncing down a dirt road towards Morrill Lake in northern New Hampshire, his wife Nicky was rubbing the sore spot on his back, saying, "Only a few minutes more, Roy. Just a few minutes more."

"Oh, I know," he said, passing a point in the road where a signpost listed about a dozen names of people owning summer cottages on this part of the lake. "But before you know it, our week will be up and it'll be time to head south."

Her hand rose up a bit to tug at his hair. "That's seven days away, love. Let's just enjoy the time and not worry about the trip back."

Then he rounded a slight bend in the road and smiled. There it was, the summer cottage they rented the first week of every August, and just the sight of it was enough to finally undo that knot between his shoulder blades. It was simple—one-story with light red paint on the clapboards. The place had a solid concrete foundation (important for keeping out four-legged pests such as field mice and chipmunks) and a screened-in porch that was about

©2000 by Brendan DuBois

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fifty feet away from the cold blue waters of Morrill Lake.

A blue canoe was chained to an oak tree, and about the cottage were tall pines that gently creaked as the wind from the lake passed over them. Roy walked with Nicky down to the water's edge. Before them were the wide waters of the lake, and to the north, the outlying peaks of the White Mountains. The only sound was that of the wind and the gentle slap of the waves, and the far-off murmuring growl of a powerboat.

Nicky slipped her arm through his. She had on khaki shorts and a white polo shirt, and her muscular arms and legs were quite tanned. Her sunglasses were pushed back on her short blond hair, and she said, "I've been thinking of this view for the past couple of hours, and it's still better than what I remember. Smell that air? Smell anything unusual?"

"Just the trees, that's all," he said, smiling at her enthusiasm.

"Right," she replied. "No diesel, no gasoline, no exhaust. Nothing."

"Well," he said, gently pulling his arm free. "If you want to smell some steaks barbecuing, we'd better get unpacked and dig out the cooler. Hungry?"

"Starved." He walked with her back to the cottage. To the left of the cottage was a grove of trees and underbrush that blocked their view of the other cottages on the road. To the right was a larger home, two-story and painted white, which belonged to the Pelletiers, who owned the rental cottage. Henry Pelletier—a retired papermill worker from Berlin—was outside, raking. He waved a hand and they both waved back. "Welcome back to Morrill Lake, you two," he called out.

"Thanks, Henry," Roy said. "How's Mrs. Pelletier doing?"

"Oh, she's on the mend," he said. "Doctor says the stitches will be coming out soon. I'm sure she'll be glad to see you when she's feelin' a bit stronger."

"Glad to hear that, Henry," Roy said. "Oh, I'll be over later to pay the other half of the rent."

"Jesus," Henry said, smiling and going back to work with the rake. "Don't be in such a hurry. Get yourselves unpacked 'fore you have to worry about that."

As Roy unlocked the front door with the key that Henry had earlier mailed to them, Nicky said, "We've been here five minutes, and already I feel like we're in a real home. You know, back in Boston we still don't know our upstairs neighbors?"

"I know that they like Gilbert & Sullivan and that their bed squeaks," Roy said, switching on the lights. "That's all I need to know."

During the next half-hour they unloaded the Jeep, and one of the first things Roy took out was Nicky's computer, which she set up on a table in the porch. There was no phone in the cottage, but

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

there was a phone line that Nicky used so she could have Internet access, and that was that. There was no television and only a small radio that picked up the local stations. She sat down at the computer and sighed. "Work. Wish I didn't have to do this when I'm up here."

"It'll be fine," Roy said. "Just as long as you leave enough time for other things. Like canoeing."

She raised an eyebrow as she smiled. "And maybe checking how squeaky our bed is, if you're lucky."

He laughed and felt warm and cuddly towards his woman, despite her work, and resumed unpacking. One of the last things Roy took out were two black zippered duffel bags, which had been placed behind the spare tire. He knew that another reason his back ached was the content of the two bags, which he now placed behind a sliding piece of paneling in the bedroom's closet. If a state trooper or local cop had pulled him over this day and had discovered the content of the two bags, well, Roy wouldn't have had to worry about coming back to this summer place next year, or the next decade, for that matter.

Back out in the porch, he kissed his wife's neck. "Feel like dinner?"

"Only if you cook it."

"Deal," he said, and he went outside, where he got the grill going. Like every summer before, the Pelletiers had filled up the gas tank. It was nice to be back, back among people who liked having them around.

Later that night they were cuddled up in the porch on a couch, a light blanket over the two of them, the lights off, listening to the cries of the loons out on the lake. Roy felt all the worries and stresses of driving up here melt away, like snow from a late March storm. Nicky had first brought him up here a couple of years back, and he was amazed at how much he looked forward each summer to returning to the lake. They had lived for a while in California and in Washington, but there had never been a place in those two states that gave him such a sense of contentment, of belonging.

Nicky was in Roy's arms and sighed as another call came from a loon. She said, "Tell me again why we can't stay up here longer."

"First, we can't afford it," he said. "Second, the place belongs to the Pelletiers, and they've got other renters lined up for the summer. We can't hog the place for the whole summer, as much as we'd like to."

She shifted in Roy's arms, rubbed her nose against his. "Can't you figure something out?"

"I'll try."

She smiled and let her hands wander over him. "Goodie, little boy. Then come to bed and I'll reward you."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

❖ ❖ ❖

Nicky made breakfast the next morning—simple stuff, scrambled eggs and toast—and she said, "All right if I get an hour or so online?"

"Sure, go right ahead," Roy said. "It'll give me a chance to pay Henry and to see what's new on the lake."

He went outside, blinked from the bright sky. There were just a few clouds off to the south; the small peaks made their green, jagged marks against the light blue sky. The water was fairly still, with only a couple of powerboats out in the distance, so far out that he couldn't even hear them.

Henry Pelletier was at work in his yard, dressed in green chino work pants and shirt, and Roy went over to see him. The old man was sawing off chunks of white birch log—each piece about eighteen inches long—using a handsaw.

Roy said, "A chainsaw would go faster."

"Unh-hunh," Henry said, moving a length of tree in the saw stand. "It surely would. But it would make a heck of a racket and would smell up the yard, and during the year I'd have to oil the damn thing, sharpen the chain, and then winterize it when I hang it up in the cellar when the snows come. Or I can use this little handsaw my daddy gave me years ago, get a little exercise, and still get the job done."

Roy smiled and passed over the check for the rent. Henry stuck it in his shirt pocket without even looking at it, and Roy was suddenly filled with affection for the old man. Anyplace else Roy had been, this kind of transaction would have required two forms of identification, a credit check, and a signed contract. But not here. Here, a man trusted his neighbor, trusted him to do the right thing. It was a way of life Roy thought had gone forever, and it warmed him to see it still alive.

He said, "Give you a hand, Henry?"

"Sure," he said. "See that twine over there? Bundle these logs up, three at a crack. Make a handle from the twine, too. Thing is, I sell 'em at Corder's Farmstand down the road. Five dollars a bundle. Damn flatland tourists buy 'em and put 'em in their fireplace. Usually they don't even burn 'em. Look awfully pretty, don't they?"

He started separating out the logs, enjoying the feel of the rough bark against his hands. "They sure do, Henry."

Henry laughed. "Funny thing is, they do look pretty, but they don't burn worth shit. Good dried oak or maple would burn ten times better, but they don't look as nice in a fireplace in a half-million-dollar home. So who am I to educate those touristy folks?"

Roy laughed with Henry, pleased that the old man talked as if Roy himself was not a flatlander, was part of the lake, even though he and his wife were just renters, known as summer people. It was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

good to work with his hands, and when he had started the fourth bundle, a loud-pitched whining noise cut through the stillness of the morning, causing Henry to stop sawing and say, "Jesus suffering Christ, look at that, will you."

He stood up and looked to where Henry was pointing. Three jet skis were out on the lake, setting up plumes of spray as their operators whooped and hollered, swaying and setting up waves from their wake. A canoe almost tipped over from the moving water, but if the jet skiers noticed, they didn't let on. Henry muttered something else and then looked up at the house. "I suppose that's going to wake Muriel from her morning nap."

"How's she doing?"

Henry shrugged. "Oh, better and better, but she still tires easily. She really needs the peace and quiet but those young bucks—" he pointed out to the jet skiers "—aren't helping matters at all."

"I thought jet skis were banned on this lake," Roy said, watching the jet skiers now move in a circle, as if they were trying to create a giant whirlpool.

"They sure are," Henry said, putting his saw back in place. "But they're smart fellows, they are. They're renting a place over on Marie's Cove for a month, and they know by the time anybody calls the Marine Patrol, they can be back there and moored up, not moving a bit. You see, Marine Patrol has to cover the entire county, and it can take a half-day or longer for someone to come by. So they have their fun and laugh at all of us while swamping canoeists, running down loons or drowning their nests, and making my Muriel lose her naptime during the day."

"Somebody should do something about it," Roy said, watching the jet skis leap up and down in the water, the high-pitched whining seeming to throb against his head.

"Yes," Henry said, "somebody should."

After dinner that night, Nicky was stretched out on the porch couch, her long legs propped up on a spare chair. Her laptop was balanced on her lap and she worked into the night while he sat across from her in an old easy chair held together by duct tape and old stitches. The chair looked like hell but was more comfortable than anything he and Nicky had back at their Boston condo. As Nicky worked, Roy read through a few days' worth of the Morrill *Sun,* a free daily newspaper that ran some fun stories, including tales of lost cats, record-size fish caught, and a retiree with too much time on his hands who thought overhead aircraft were spraying the air with experimental chemicals. A much more fun newspaper than either the *Boston Globe* or the *Boston Herald.*

Nicky looked up and said, "Well, hon, something's pulled through. A business appointment, tomorrow night."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Where?" he said, putting the newspaper down for a moment.

"In Maine, about an hour away."

He frowned and said, "You know I don't like it when you bring work along on our vacation."

"I know, babe, honest I do," she said. "But the money's good and it won't take long."

He sighed, listening to the faint thumping noises as moths and other flying bugs battered themselves to death against the screen windows of the porch. Nicky was right; she was always right when it came to her work, and she knew that without his support, the whole thing wouldn't work. Still, it was vacation . . .

He had a thought. "All right. But tonight, I need to do something on my own."

"Oh?" she said, arching an eyebrow. "Going to rendezvous with some lake honey that you keep up here?"

He smiled at her. God, how he loved this woman. "No, nothing like that. But it's a favor for Henry."

"Really? Do you need any help?"

"Nope, but you know what? Maybe tomorrow you could take Muriel for a ride into town. A couple of her sisters are getting together for lunch. Henry mentioned something earlier about how she wants to get out of the house, but Henry doesn't trust his truck to take her into town and back. Says there's not enough room and the ride'd be too bumpy."

"Oh, I'd love to help Muriel out," she said, hands still on the laptop's keyboard. "But what about tonight? What are you doing for Henry?"

He opened up the newspaper. "I'll tell you tomorrow."

She put a whining tone in her voice. "But I want to know now . . . "

Roy grinned at her, turned the page. "If I tell you, I'll have to kill you."

She smirked back at him, returned to her laptop. "Promises, promises."

It was now three A.M. and Roy was in the canoe that came with the cottage, paddling as silently as he could through Marie's Cove. It was a still night and, luckily, there was no moon. The stars were as bright overhead as he could ever remember them, and the lights around the lake were so few that he could easily make out the misty veil of the Milky Way stretching overhead.

The cottages along the shoreline were quiet, with just a few lights showing. The water was still and silent, and he enjoyed the feel of the paddle slicing through the water. At his feet were a sealed water bag and a black inflatable life vest. Now that he'd been out on the water for a while, his night vision was good, and it

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

only took a few minutes to spot the dock where the three jet skis were moored. The cottage at the other end of the dock was quiet, save for a single porch light.

He paddled some more into the cove, until he came to a small point of land where an evergreen was growing out over the water. In another minute he had tied off the canoe, and then took off his T-shirt and put on the life vest, which he quickly inflated with a few puffs of air into the tube valve. Then, waterbag in his hand, he quickly slid into the lake.

The water surprised him. He was expecting it to be teeth-chatteringly cold, but instead, it felt warm. He smiled in the darkness. This could be fun. He paddled slowly, the water bag floating in front of him, listening to the patient sound of the frogs. When he was near the first jet ski, there came a mournful wail from the south end of the lake, a noise that made the back of his neck prickle. A loon, calling out to its mate somewhere in the darkness of the lake waters.

He got to work on the jet skis, and when he was done he froze, holding onto a dock piling. A male voice was above him, saying, "What the hell?"

Roy hugged himself against the rough wood, waiting. Another voice joined the first, a female: "What's wrong?"

"This friggin' beer," he said. "It's empty."

"Shhh, come on back in, I'll get you another."

Some low murmurs and giggles, and then Roy swam back out on the lake. Halfway to the canoe he took a few minutes for fun and just rolled on his back, looking up at the night sky. In the space of just a few minutes, he saw two shooting stars and three satellites pass overhead. It felt good to be alive.

The next day Roy was helping Henry rake out pine needles, pine cones, and other sludge that had washed up on the tiny sandy beach. The water was fairly shallow on this part of the lake, and Henry liked to keep the bottom clean, especially for his visiting grandnieces and nephews.

It was good, solid work, pulling a garden rake across the lake bottom, and then walking over to the shore to drop off the debris. Henry would later rake it into a big pile to be burned in the fall. They both wore knee-high boots, but while Roy had on just a bathing suit, Henry had on his summer work uniform of green chino pants and shirt. Nicky had gone out as well, taking Muriel to town, and Roy had promised a little story about what he had done the previous night when they both had the time.

He and Henry didn't talk much during the work, which was fine, so Roy was surprised when Henry paused, leaning against his rake, and said, "Can you spare me a couple of minutes, Roy?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Sure," he said. "What's up?"

Henry wrapped both gnarled hands around the worn wood handle of the rake. "Oh, something, that's for sure. You know about my two boys, don't you? Alex and Andrew."

"Sure. Andrew's out in Detroit, working for Ford. And Alex is at the papermill in Berlin."

Henry nodded, looking pleased, as if Roy had just passed an oral exam. He said, "Both are good boys, but . . . well, Muriel and me, we wonder sometimes about what's inside of 'em."

"How's that?"

Henry took a hand off the rake and motioned up to the house. "When they was younger, they loved this place, they really did. They'd come in after Memorial Day and spend the whole summer here, and then they'd cry after Labor Day, wishing they didn't have to leave."

Roy rubbed at his chin. "Let me guess. They got older, things changed."

"Yap," and in that one syllable, Roy sensed years of disappointment. "I can't remember the last time Andrew's been here, and Alex, well, to get him and his family here for a weekend takes weeks of planning. All those soccer games, baseball practice, and everything they have to work around. And last year, at Thanksgiving, I mentioned something about leaving this place to the both of 'em after Muriel and I passed on. And you know what I found out?"

Roy had an excellent idea of what he had found out, but wanted to hear it from Henry directly. "No, I don't."

Henry leaned into the rake again. "The boys were talking in the kitchen afterwards, like they was twelve or thirteen again. They thought I had been sleeping on the couch, after all that turkey, and they were so excited about this place. But they weren't excited about keeping it, nossir. They were trying to figure out how much money they could make selling it, and how much they would split between the two of them. This house here, which I helped build with my father and his father. Sold, just for money."

Henry turned away and Roy was sure that the man's eyes were tearing up, so he gave him a few seconds as he raked the sand in the water a few times. Henry spoke up again, his voice softer. "So Muriel and I were thinking. We plan to go to town this week, change our will. We want to leave this place to someone who'll appreciate it, someone who loves it as much as we do. Roy, me and the missus want to leave this place to you and Nicky when we pass on."

Roy almost dropped the rake. "Henry, please, you can't—"

The old man turned, his face a frown. "By God, Roy, I've been an adult for most of this century, so don't you tell me what I can or can't do. You and your wife, you're not gettin' this place this sum-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mer, or even the summer after that. But you will get it, because we want you to have it. We know you'll love it as much as we do. You are both good people, real good people. And that's final. You start raising a fuss, then maybe my two boys, they'll think that Muriel and I have lost our minds, and they'll start fighting the will right now. But that won't be right. So you just stay quiet there and say yes, and we'll get back to raking this place. All right?"

He couldn't help himself, he just started smiling. "Damn it, Henry, yes. That's our answer. And don't be offended, but I hope it's many summers before we end up owning this place."

"Nope," Henry said, "I won't be insulted."

Then the noise started again, that grating, whining noise that set his teeth on edge. Roy looked up and the three jet skis were heading out to the lake, the young men whooping it up as they dodged among each other, racing over each other's wakes. Henry murmured something and Roy just watched, seeing the brightly colored watercraft bounce up and down. The noise seemed to be getting louder and louder.

Even though he was expecting it, Roy flinched when the explosions ripped out, one after another, *bam! bam! bam!* Henry swore, and they looked on as three plumes of smoke rose up and then quickly dissipated in the lake breeze. All three jet skis had turned turtle, oily wisps of smoke rising up, and Roy noted three lifejackets in the lake, arms waving, some shouts. It looked like all three young men had survived. Oh well.

"Well," Henry said, looking intently at Roy, "ain't that something?"

"Sure is," Roy said.

Henry slogged toward the shore, rake in his hands. "Guess I should do the neighborly thing, call the Marine Patrol. Funny thing is, this'll probably be the first time those boys will be happy to see them. What do you think?"

Roy sighed with contentment at the scene. "I think you're right, Henry."

Lunch was chicken and goat-cheese sandwiches, and Nicky looked over and said, "Hon, you're the best. Honest to God, you are."

"What do you mean?" he asked, pouring her a Sam Adams beer.

"What you did for Henry, that's what," she said.

He shrugged. "I just did the right thing, helping him rake out the shoreline like that."

She reached over the table and kissed him. "I wasn't talking about the raking, you silly man. I was talking about the jet skis."

Roy tried not to smile and failed. "I have no idea what you mean."

She kissed him again. "You do many things well, but lying to me isn't one of them."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

❖ ❖ ❖

Later that night, after an hour of driving, he and his wife were near the Maine town of Lovell. Nicky had on a pair of black spandex pants, black high-heeled shoes, a white top that exposed her bare midriff, and a short black jacket that seemed to emphasize her chest. He pulled up at the end of the long driveway, noting the large house up on the hill. Lights were on in the farmer's porch, and on little driveway lamps leading all the way up to the entrance. "You're sure this is the place?" he asked.

"Yep," she said, voice cheery. "The directions were perfect."

"I guess they were," he said. Roy had on a dirty pair of jeans, worn through at the knees, a Harley-Davidson T-shirt, and a black leather vest. He had slicked back his hair and looked over at his wife, loving her deeply yet hating the fact that she was working on their vacation. It was as if she sensed what was going through his mind and she leaned over and kissed him.

"It'll be fine, dearest, honest," she said. "I won't be long, and we sure can use the money."

"You just be careful," Roy said.

She opened the door, grabbed a small purse. "I always am, lover. I always am."

She slammed the door and then started walking gracefully up the long driveway, hips swaying, and he watched her until she got up to the porch. Then he started up the Jeep and drove down the road, pulled over, and waited. It was going to be a busy night. He had decided earlier not to tell her about Henry's amazing offer—he wanted to make sure she was focused on her job—but he knew he would tell her later tonight, when things were wrapped up.

From underneath his seat he pulled out a small flask of Jim Beam, and took a couple of swallows. The strong taste burned at him. He then rolled down the window of the Jeep and lit a cigarette, took a couple of puffs, and then tossed the cigarette out onto the asphalt. From the woods came the sound of an owl, *hoo-hoo-hoo,* out on a night hunt.

How appropriate. He reached under the driver's seat again, pulled out a 9mm Smith & Wesson, placed it in his lap. Then he started up the Jeep and made a careful U-turn, and returned to the house.

Roy sped up the driveway, headlights on high. He slammed the brakes to skid to a stop, making enough noise to be heard in the next county. He got out of the Jeep, strode up to the porch, bottle of Jim Beam in one hand, the pistol in the other. He plowed through the door in a matter of seconds and yelled out, "Wife! You damn whore, where the hell are you?"

Before him was a wide stairway, and off to the left was a room that looked like it would be called a formal dining room. Big pol-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ished table, lots of stiff-looking chairs. From upstairs came some noises, and he took the stairs, two steps at a time, and went to the left down a hallway that had paintings hanging on the walls. The murmuring voices got louder. The door at the end of the hallway was nearly closed. He smashed it open with a kick.

He took in the scene with a practiced eye. The bedroom was about the size of his first apartment after getting out of the army all those years ago. Heavy-looking bureaus on both sides, floor-to-ceiling mirrors, a bed the size of a Buick in the center, with four posts rising toward a chandeliered ceiling. His wife was kneeling on the bed, her eyes wide with shock. She had taken off her pants and top, and had on a skimpy black lace bra and even skimpier panties. A tube of oil was in her hands. Candles had been lit and placed on the nightstands, and in the bed with his wife was an overweight man, maybe late twenties, holding a sheet up to his pink and chubby chest.

"Oh, babe, please don't overreact, it's not what it looks like," she said, starting to get off the bed.

In the space of a few quick steps he reached her and slapped at her face, tumbling her to the floor, her long legs tangled in the sheets. She cried out and he yelled, "I know exactly what it looks like, you whore!"

Then the rage started deep inside of him, at seeing his woman, his wife, the center of his affection and love, almost naked in bed with another man, a complete stranger. He threw the bottle of bourbon at one of the mirrors, cracking it and sending a brown spray of liquid against the wallpapered wall. He jumped on the bed as the fat man tried to scurry away, grabbed at his hair, and pointed the pistol at the smooth forehead.

On the floor, his wife was weeping, but he stared at the trembling face of the younger man. "How much?" Roy demanded.

The man stammered. "Wha—wha—what do you mean?"

Roy popped the end of the pistol barrel against the man's forehead a few times. "How much were you going to pay her, you fat bastard?"

"One . . . one thousand dollars . . ." he said. "Look, I didn't know she was married, honest to God, I just met her over the Internet, it was a straight deal, nothing more, mister, honest, you gotta believe me . . ."

Roy turned, his voice still raised in anger. "Is that true, a thousand dollars? Do you have it?"

She raised her head, the tears making long mascara trails down her cheeks. "Yeah, babe, I got the money, and I—"

"Shut up," he said. "If I want to know more, I'll ask you." He turned his attention back to the man in the bed, sniffed the air. Jesus, did he ever bathe? He rapped the pistol against the forehead again. "I should shoot you, right here and now. No court in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the county would convict me, a man sleeping with another man's wife. You don't think I'd get away with it?"

The man seemed to rally a bit. "Murder? You think you can kill me for something like this?"

Roy laughed hard. "Who said anything about murder? How about this?" Roy slapped the man's face and then grabbed his hand and pulled his arm out. The man yelped, and as Nicky started shrieking, Roy placed the muzzle end of the pistol against the man's right elbow.

"One squeeze of the trigger, man, one quick squeeze of the trigger and I'll shatter this elbow," Roy snarled. "I don't care how good the hospitals are around here, it'll never be the same. The rest of your life, every time you see the scar and feel the stiffness, every time you try to pick up something and your elbow aches, you'll remember me. You'll remember trying to sleep with another man's wife. You'll always remember."

Roy snapped back the hammer, the sound loud in the bedroom. "And maybe I'll do one of your knees, just to balance everything out."

The man started blubbering and Nicky stood up, sheet held against her body. "Wait, babe, wait!"

"Did I say you could talk? Did I?"

"No, please," she said, holding a hand out. "Maybe we can work out a deal. Something to make it right. I mean, I was being paid, all right? Maybe if you get compensated, too, promise not to hurt Clarence here, then we can just end it here tonight."

The man called Clarence said, "Yes, yes, that sounds good. Honest, look, let's see if we can work something out."

Roy took a relaxed breath, slowly pulled the trigger with one hand and lowered the hammer with the other. His fury and anger seemed to seep away from him, just like every time before—except for that one time each in California and Washington when things didn't go well and they had to move away—

"All right," he said. "Start talking."

In the Jeep Cherokee he was exhausted. The drive back to Morrill Lake seemed to take forever, and since they had both gotten inside and driven away from Lovell, not one word had been said for a long while.

Finally, Nicky cleared her throat and said, "Well."

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yep."

He coughed, hating the taste of the tobacco and bourbon in his mouth. "Did I get you back there, when I took a swipe at you? I thought for sure my hand caught the edge of your chin."

She laughed and he saw her hand move against her face. "Yeah,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I think you did. Don't worry. I'll put an icepack on it tonight."

He reached over, squeezed her leg. "Sorry about that."

"Not to worry, not to worry."

"And who was Clarence?" Roy asked.

He could sense her smile next to him. "Some rich boy whose daddy left him a lot of money, and not a lot of social skills. A nice little boy with some very odd desires."

Another mile went by. "So," Roy said. "What's the haul tonight?"

Nicky reached up, turned on the overhead light, and then began rummaging through a brown paper grocery bag, like a housewife checking her day's shopping. "Let's see. Five thousand in cash. Five gold Krugerrands. A couple of gold bracelets. One diamond pinky ring—and if I ever see you in a pinky ring, I'll slap you silly, hon—and one of those PalmPilot computers. A good night's work, don't you think?"

He remembered seeing her almost naked in bed with that man, that rich, lonely fat man who probably thought he had gotten the date of his life through the Internet. He remembered the other times as well, where the script had been followed, and the two times when it hadn't. Once, in California, where a rich Silicon Valley guy started laughing at him, egging him on. And once, as well, in Washington, where the guy had started right in and had pinned Nicky down on a couch in the living room, tearing at her as if he thought since he was paying for her he could do anything he wanted.

Both times, things went wrong. Both times that fury inside of him had just blown out, like a rocket engine, and he had emptied his pistol in both of those guys, wiping away their grins, wiping away their hungers. After each time, they had moved away and had started up again: Such was their way of life.

He glanced over at her, smiling. "Yes, it was a good night's work."

After they got back to the cottage and had put away their tools and their rewards, they went to bed and performed the traditional after-work celebration, which was always fun, and which was always a good way of reaffirming their love and commitment to each other. Then they took a shower together, so that Roy could get the grease out of his hair, and Nicky could get the scent of another man's bedroom off her body.

The night was quite warm and they went out to the porch, still unclothed, glasses of Rémy Martin in their hands. Roy slowly caressed the naked back of his wife as they stretched out on the couch, a single sheet over the both of them. Nicky went on for a while about Muriel next door, how the old woman appreciated the drive into town to meet her sisters, and Nicky said she was planning to take her grocery shopping later the next day. Then, Roy smiled and told her of Henry's offer.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Nicky sat up so quick that she almost spilled his glass of cognac. "You're not teasing me, are you? This is the God's honest truth?"

He sipped at the cognac, glad to finally wash out the taste of tobacco and bourbon from his mouth. "The honest truth, hon. Once Henry and Muriel die, we get the house and this cottage. We can live up here year round, if you'd like, and get a little income from renting out the cottage. Maybe cut back on your work schedule."

She hugged him tight. "Oh, Roy, that sounds wonderful . . . My God, it's a dream come true, it really is. Imagine being up here for the whole summer, not having to move out when the next renters come by. Imagine what it'll be like in the fall, when the leaves change. Or when the lake freezes over. We can snowshoe and ski and you can take up ice fishing and—"

He started laughing, kissing at her neck. "Slow down, hon, slow down. It's going to happen, but probably not right away. We're going to be in their wills. We're not getting everything tomorrow."

"Oh, I know, but still . . . oh, Roy, it's going to be great."

They lay there for a few more minutes, each sipping at their cognac, and then a loon call started, and then another, and then a third. The yodeling and calling echoed among the trees and hills of the lake, and Nicky snuggled in close to Roy and said, "Darling?"

"Yes?"

"Henry and Muriel . . . how old are they?"

"Don't know," he said. "Probably their late seventies."

"What do you think their life expectancy is?"

"Don't rightly know," Roy said. "They could both pass on this winter. But they're both hardy New Englanders. They could last another decade."

"Oh." The loon noise continued and Roy thought that he was the luckiest man in the world to be in such a place and to have such a woman at his side.

She spoke up again. "Do you think . . . well, do you think you could figure out a way to . . . well, you know . . . speed things up. I mean, well, I hate to think of us waiting for another ten or fifteen years, you know?"

He knew exactly what was going on in her mind, and he reached down and kissed the top of her head. "That's some thought, dear, but no. We're not going to do anything to them."

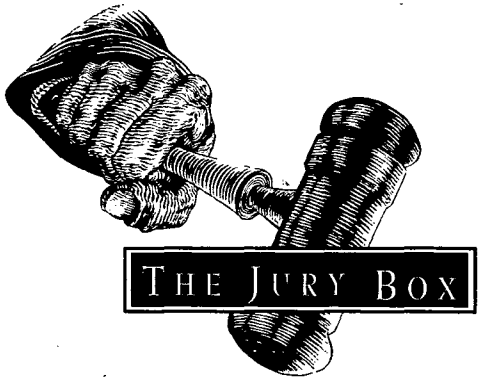
"Why?" she asked.

Roy recalled something Henry had said yesterday. "Because we're good people, that's why. Even Henry said that to me. And not killing your neighbors is what good people do."

Nicky laughed and snuggled in under his arm. "Thanks for reminding me."

He kissed her again. "You're welcome." ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



by Jon L. Breen

Fresh Blood 3 (Do-Not Press/Dufour, $16.95), edited by Mike Ripley and Maxim Jakubowski, is a fine place to sample the work of some promising and accomplished writers from the British New Wave (or Brit Noir) school of crime fiction. Though the celebrated Minette Walters leads off with a deft and subtle vignette, "English Autumn—American Fall," most of the other contributors are less familiar to American readers. Especially recommended: Paul Charles's "Frankie and Johnny Were Lovers?," an offbeat case for London cop Christy Kennedy; Peter Guttridge's "The Postman Only Rings When He Can Be Bothered," which parodies a different school of crime fiction from the one implied by the title; Manda Scott's "99%," a decidedly non-cozy tale told by a veterinarian sleuth; and Lee Child's "James Penney's New Identity," which features series sleuth Jack Reacher in an unusual role. Unhip critic's confession: I was as puzzled as the clueless narrator of Mike Ripley's "Angel Eyes" about how the taxi-driving sleuth got his case solved.

In their adoration of American crime fiction, the Brit Noir crowd sometimes underrate their national forebears. Paul Johnston writes, in introducing his gimmicky "Crime Fest": "Some of the most notable writers of the twentieth century have given us crime stories—Hemingway, Faulkner, Chandler, Hammett, Highsmith, Ellroy. Too many Americans? All right, go back a few years to Conan Doyle, Stevenson, Wilkie Collins." No twentieth-century British crime writers belong on the same plane with Chandler and friends? Not Dorothy L. Sayers, not Ruth Rendell, not Julian Symons, not Peter Dickinson?

An example of Johnston's book-length fiction is considered later in this column, but first the latest from a more traditional British author.

©2000 by Jon L. Breen

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

*** Peter Lovesey: *The Vault,* Soho, $23. In his sixth book-length appearance, Bath police detective Peter Diamond looks into possibly related cases involving a cement-encased hand found at the Roman Baths and a copy of Milton's poetry that may have belonged to Frankenstein author Mary W. Shelley. Lovesey is one of the best active practitioners of deviously plotted pure detection, and even an average example of his work (which this is) merits your attention. (Soho is also reprinting the excellent 1991 first novel in the Diamond series, *The Last Detective* [$13], in which the sleuth's Luddite tendencies are more emphasized.)

*** Barbara D'Amato: *Of Course You Know That Chocolate is a Vegetable and Other Stories,* Five Star, $20.95. Like D'Amato's novels, these dozen stories combine solid research, likable characters, and ingenious plotting, a can't-lose combination. Journalist Cat Marsala appears in two stories, one of them in company with the author's other series detectives, Chicago cops Susannah Figueroa and Norm Bennis, who are on their own in six others. Of particular interest are "Shelved," which should appeal to Ellery Queen fans for a couple of reasons; and a pair of stories that share the theme of how conflicting witnesses can both be telling the truth: "Hard Feelings" and "See No Evil." The collection is bookended by strong non-series entries, beginning with the droll multi-award-winning title tale (which *EQMM* readers will recall with pleasure) and ending with the shocking "Motel 66."

*** Joan Hess: *A Conventional Corpse,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $23.95. Hess likes to have fun with mystery conventions, in both senses of the word. Here several crime writers, at least some of them with recognizable real-life counterparts, descend on Farberville, Arkansas, for a conference, and bookseller sleuth Claire Malloy, who just wants to move some merchandise, finds herself embroiled in murder when a disliked publisher's editor turns up unexpectedly. Malloy's narrative, funny even at the most stressful moments, delivers jaundiced observations on the current state of publishing and satirical jabs at mystery trends and personalities.

*** Robert B. Parker: *Hugger Mugger,* Putnam, $23.95. Boston private eye Spenser goes among the turf bluebloods investigating threats to the titular colt, reputedly a potential Secretariat. Parker now plays the wisecracking macho P.I. genre almost entirely for laughs. This one, more of a real detective story than most in the series, is his Thin Man homage—Spenser's climactic speech to the gathered suspects cries out for interpretation by William Powell. The windup, though, departs from the formula in a couple of ways.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

** Janet Dawson: *A Killing at the Track,* Fawcett, $6.99. Thoroughbred racing also figures in Bay Area private eye Jeri Howard's latest case. The background is more detailed than in any racing mystery in memory and also commendably accurate. The writing is smoothly professional, the characters involving. Now the bad news: The novel, like so many in the current market, is padded to about twice its optimum length, and the overly informative overheard conversation that helps Jeri to the solution will make you groan.

** Paul Johnston: *The Bone Yard,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $23.95. In the early 2020s, Edinburgh has become an independent city-state, ostensibly based on Plato's Republic, that depends on tourism and deprives its citizens of most of their rights and comforts. Johnston does a good job of integrating needed background details with the story of Quint Dalrymple's search for a killer who leaves music inside the bodies of his victims, but apart from the not-really-believable near-future dystopia, the plot develops along standardized lines. Familiarity with the earlier Dalrymple novel, *Body Politic,* though not essential, presumably helps.

There are new books to recommend about three of crime fiction's greats. Hugh Merrill's dreadfully-titled *The Red Hot Typewriter: The Life and Times of John D. MacDonald* (St. Martin's Minotaur, $24.95), the first full-scale biography of its subject, provides plenty of unfamiliar information, plus illuminating quotes from JDM's letters and published work, but the quality of the writing falls short of the research and organization. Matthew Bunson's *The Complete Christie: An Agatha Christie Encyclopedia* (Pocket, $35 hardcover; $18.95 trade paper) does a thorough and reliable job of summarizing all the subject's writings in one alphabetical sequence, followed by sections on characters, film and television adaptations, and plays. Though the evaluative content on Christie's own writings is disappointingly meager, the film adaptations get some forthright critical comment. Solution giveaways are, of course, scrupulously avoided—even of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and *Murder on the Orient Express.* John Evangelist Walsh, who won a true-crime Edgar for his 1968 volume *Poe the Detective,* returns to the Father of the Detective Story in the scholarly and well-written *Midnight Dreary: The Mysterious Death of Edgar Allan Poe* (St. Martin's Minotaur, $14.95), which offers a persuasive theory of how and why Poe met his untimely end in 1849. The volume was originally published in 1998 by Rutgers University Press.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art by Mark Evans

Missing in Action

by Peter Robinson

People go missing all the time in war, of course, but not usually nine-year-old boys. Besides, the war had hardly begun. It was only the twentieth of September, 1939, when Mary Critchley came hammering on my door at about three o'clock, interrupting my afternoon nap.

It was a Wednesday, and normally I would have been teaching the fifth-formers Shakespeare at Silverhill Grammar School (a thankless task if ever there was one), but the Ministry had just got around to constructing air-raid shelters there, so the school was closed for the week. We didn't even know if it was going to reopen, because the idea was to evacuate all the children to safer areas in the countryside. Now, I would be among the first to admit that a teacher's highest aspiration is a school without pupils, but in the meantime the government, in its eternal wisdom, put us redundant teachers to such complex, intellectual tasks as preparing ration cards for the Ministry of Food. (After all, *they* knew what was coming.)

All this was just a small part of the chaos that seemed to reign at that time. Not the chaos of war, the kind I remembered from the

©2000 by Peter Robinson

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

trenches at Ypres in 1917, but the chaos of government bureaucracies trying to organize the country for war.

Anyway, I was fortunate enough to become Special Constable, which is a rather grandiose title for a sort of part-time dogsbody, and that was why Mary Critchley came running to me. That and what little reputation I had for solving people's problems.

"Mr. Bashcombe! Mr. Bashcombe!" she cried. "It's our Johnny. He's gone missing. You must help."

My name is actually *Bascombe,* Frank Bascombe, but Mary Critchley has a slight speech impediment, so I forgave her the mispronunciation. Still, with half the city's children running wild in the streets and the other half standing on crowded station platforms clutching their Mickey Mouse gas masks in little cardboard boxes, ready to be herded into trains bound for such nearby country havens as Graythorpe, Kilsden, and Acksham, I thought perhaps she was overreacting a tad, and I can't say I welcomed her arrival after only about twenty of my allotted forty winks.

Peter Robinson, multiple Arthur Ellis Award winner and 1999 Edgar Allan Poe Award nominee for his novel *In a Dry Season* (Avon), is back this month with a second tale featuring Frank Bascombe, Special Constable—a schoolteacher recruited for police duties while the regular forces are occupied with war work. The time is late 1939, and Britain's entry into World War II has hardly yet been felt by the majority of Britons. ¶

"He's probably out playing with his mates," I told her.

"Not my Johnny," she said, wiping the tears from her eyes. "Not since . . . you know . . ."

I knew. Mr. Critchley, Ted to his friends, had been a Royal Navy man since well before the war. He had also been unfortunate enough to serve on the fleet carrier *Courageous,* which had been sunk by a German U-boat off the southwest coast of Ireland just three days ago. Over 500 men had been lost, including Ted Critchley. Of course, no body had been found, and probably never would be, so he was only officially "missing in action."

I also knew young Johnny Critchley, and thought him to be a serious boy, a bit too imaginative and innocent for his own good. (Well, many are at that age, aren't they, before the world grabs them by the balls and shakes some reality into them.) Johnny trusted everyone, even strangers.

"Johnny's not been in much of a mood for playing with his mates since we got the news about Ted's ship," Mary Critchley went on.

I could understand that well enough—young Johnny was an

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

only child, and he always did worship his father—but I still didn't see what I could do about it. "Have you asked around?"

"What do you think I've been doing since he didn't come home at twelve o'clock like he was supposed to? I've asked everyone in the street. Last time he was seen he was down by the canal at about eleven o'clock. Maurice Richards saw him. What can I do, Mr. Bashcombe? First Ted, and now . . . now my Johnny!" She burst into tears.

After I had managed to calm her down, I sighed and told her I would look for Johnny myself. There certainly wasn't much hope of my getting the other twenty winks now.

It was a glorious day, so warm and sunny you would hardly believe there was a war on. The late afternoon sunshine made even our narrow streets of cramped brick terrace houses look attractive. As the shadows lengthened, the light turned to molten gold. First, I scoured the local rec where the children played cricket and football, and the dogs ran wild. Some soldiers were busy digging trenches for air-raid shelters. Just the sight of those long, dark grooves in the earth gave me the shivers. Behind the trenches, barrage balloons pulled at their moorings on the breeze like playful porpoises, orange and pink in the sun. I asked the soldiers, but they hadn't seen Johnny. Nor had any of the other lads.

After the rec I headed for the derelict houses on Gallipoli Street. The landlord had let them go to rack and ruin two years ago, and they were quite uninhabitable, not even fit for billeting soldiers. They were also dangerous and should have been pulled down, but I think the old skinflint was hoping a bomb would hit them so he could claim insurance or compensation from the government. The doors and windows had been boarded up, but children are resourceful, and it wasn't difficult even for me to remove a couple of loose sheets of plywood and make my way inside. I wished I had my torch, but I had to make do with what little light slipped through the holes. Every time I moved, my feet stirred up clouds of dust, which did my poor lungs no good at all.

I thought Johnny might have fallen or got trapped in one of the houses. The staircases were rotten, and more than one lad had fallen through on his way up. The floors weren't much better, either, and one of the fourth-formers at Silverhill had needed more than fifteen stitches a couple of weeks ago when one of his legs went right through the rotten wood and the splinters gouged his flesh.

I searched as best I could in the poor light, and I called out Johnny's name, but no answer came. Before I left, I stood silently and listened for any traces of harsh breathing or whimpering.

Nothing.

After three hours of searching the neighbourhood, I'd had no

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

luck at all. Blackout time was 7:45 P.M., so I still had about an hour and a half left, but if Johnny wasn't in any of the local children's usual haunts, I was at a loss as to where to look. I talked to the other boys I met here and there, but none of his friends had seen him since the family got the news of Ted's death. Little Johnny Critchley, it seemed, had vanished into thin air.

At half-past six, I called on Maurice Richards, grateful for his offer of a cup of tea and the chance to rest my aching feet. Maurice and I went back a long time. We had both survived the first war, Maurice with the loss of an arm and me with permanent facial scarring and a wracking cough that comes and goes, thanks to the mustard gas leaking through my mask at the Third Battle of Ypres. We never talked about the war, but it was there, we both knew, an invisible bond tying us close together while at the same time excluding us from so much other, normal human intercourse. Not many had seen the things we had, and thank God for that.

Maurice lit up a Passing Cloud one-handed, then he poured the tea. The seven o'clock news came on the radio, some such rot about us vowing to keep fighting until we'd vanquished the foe. It was still very much a war of words at that time, and the more rhetorical the language sounded, the better the politicians thought they were doing. There had been a couple of minor air skirmishes, and the sinking of the *Courageous,* of course, but all the action was taking place in Poland, which seemed as remote as the moon to most people. Some clever buggers had already started calling it the "Bore War."

"Did you hear Tommy Handley last night, Frank?" Maurice asked.

I shook my head. There'd been a lot of hoopla about Tommy Handley's new radio programme, "It's That Man Again," or "ITMA," as people called it. I was never a fan. Call me a snob, but when evening falls I'm far happier curling up with a good book or an interesting talk on the radio than listening to Tommy Handley.

"Talk about a laugh," said Maurice. "They had this one sketch about the Ministry of Aggravation and the Office of Twerps. I nearly died."

I smiled. "Not far from the truth," I said. There were now so many of these obscure ministries, boards, and departments involved in so many absurd pursuits—all for the common good, of course—that I had been thinking of writing a dystopian satire. I proposed to set it in the near future, which would merely be a thinly disguised version of the present. So far, all I had was a great idea for the title: I would reverse the last two numbers in the current year, so instead of 1939, I'd call it *1993.* (Well, *I* thought it was a good idea!) "Look, Maurice," I said, "it's about

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

young Johnny Critchley. His mother tells me you were the last person to see him."

"Oh, aye," Maurice said. "She were round asking about him not long ago. Still not turned up?"

"No."

"Cause for concern, then."

"I'm beginning to think so. What was he doing when you saw him?"

"Just walking down by the canal, by old Woodruff's scrap yard."

"That's all?"

"Yes."

"Was he alone?"

Maurice nodded.

"Did he say anything."

"No."

"You didn't say anything to him?"

"No cause to. He seemed preoccupied, just staring in the water, like, hands in his pockets. I've heard what happened to his dad. A lad has to do his grieving."

"Too true. Did you see anyone else? Anything suspicious?"

"No, nothing. Just a minute, though . . ."

"What?"

"Oh, it's probably nothing, but just after I saw Johnny, when I was crossing the bridge, I bumped into Colin Gormond, you know, that chap who's a bit . . . you know."

Colin Gormond. I knew him all right. And that wasn't good news; it wasn't good news at all.

Of all the policemen they could have sent, they had to send Detective bloody Sergeant Longbottom, a big, brutish-looking fellow with a pronounced limp and a Cro-Magnon brow. Longbottom was thick as two short planks. I doubt he could have found his own arse even if someone nailed a sign on it, or detect his way out of an Anderson shelter if it were in his own backyard. But that's the calibre of men this wretched war has left us with at home. Along with good ones like me, of course.

DS Longbottom wore a shiny brown suit and a Silverhill Grammar School tie. I wondered where he'd got it from; he probably stole it from some schoolboy he caught nicking sweets from the corner shop. He kept tugging at his collar with his pink sausage fingers as we talked in Mary Critchley's living room. His face was flushed with the heat, and sweat gathered on his thick eyebrows and trickled down the sides of his neck.

"So he's been missing since lunchtime, has he?" DS Longbottom repeated.

Mary Critchley nodded. "He went out at about half-past ten,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

just for a walk, like. Said he'd be back at twelve. When it got to three . . . well, I went to see Mr. Bashcombe here."

DS Longbottom curled his lip at me and grunted. "Mr. Bascombe. *Special* Constable. I suppose you realize that gives you no real police powers, don't you?"

"As a matter of fact," I said, "I thought it made me your superior. After all, you're not a *special* sergeant, are you?"

He looked at me as if he wanted to hit me. Perhaps he would have done if Mary Critchley hadn't been in the room. "Enough of your lip. Just answer my questions."

"Yes, sir."

"You say you looked all over for this lad?"

"All his usual haunts."

"And you found no trace of him?"

"If I had, do you think we'd have sent for you?"

"I warned you. Cut the lip and answer the questions. This, what's his name, Maurice Richards, was he the last person to see the lad?"

"Johnny's his name. And yes is the answer, as far as we know." I paused. He'd have to know eventually, and if I didn't tell him, Maurice would. The longer we delayed, the worse it would be in the long run. "There was someone else in the area at the time. A man called Colin Gormond."

Mary Critchley gave a sharp gasp. DS Longbottom frowned, licked the tip of his pencil, and scribbled something in his notebook. "I'll have to have a word with him," he said. Then he turned to her. "Recognize the name, do you, ma'am?"

"I know Colin," I answered, perhaps a bit too quickly.

DS Longbottom stared at Mary Critchley, whose lower lip started quivering, then turned slowly back to me. "Tell me about him."

I sighed. Colin Gormond was an oddball. Some people said he was a bit slow, but I'd never seen any real evidence of that. He lived alone and he didn't have much to do with the locals; that was enough evidence against him for some people.

And then there were the children.

For some reason, Colin preferred the company of the local lads to that of the rest of us adults. To be quite honest, I can't say I blame him, but in a situation like this it's bound to look suspicious. Especially if the investigating officer is someone with the sensitivity and understanding of a DS Longbottom.

Colin would take them train-spotting on the hill overlooking the main line, for example, or he'd play cricket with them on the rec or hand out conkers when the season came. He sometimes bought them sweets and ice creams, even gave them books, marbles, and comics.

To my knowledge, Colin Gormond had never once put a foot out of line, never laid so much as a finger on any of the lads, either in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

anger or in friendship. There had, however, been one or two mutterings from some parents—most notably from Jack Blackwell, father of one of Johnny's pals, Nick—that it somehow *wasn't right,* that it was *unnatural* for a man who must be in his late thirties or early forties to spend so much time playing with young children. There must be something not quite right in his head, he must be up to *something,* Jack Blackwell hinted, and as usual when someone starts a vicious rumour, there is no shortage of willing believers. Such a reaction was only to be expected from someone, of course, but I knew it wouldn't go down well with DS Longbottom. I don't know why, but I felt a strange need to *protect* Colin.

"Colin's a local," I explained. "Lived around here for years. He plays with the lads a bit. Most of them like him. He seems a harmless sort of fellow."

"How old is he?"

I shrugged. "Hard to say. About forty, perhaps."

DS Longbottom raised a thick eyebrow. "About forty, and he plays with the kiddies, you say?"

"Sometimes. Like a schoolteacher, or a youth-club leader."

"Is he a schoolteacher?"

"No."

"Is he a youth-club leader?"

"No. Look, what I meant—"

"I know exactly what you meant, Mr. Bascombe. Now you just listen to what *I* mean. What we've got here is an older man who's known to hang around with young children, and he's been placed near the scene where a young child has gone missing. Now, don't you think that's just a wee bit suspicious?"

Mary Critchley let out a great wail and started crying again. DS Longbottom ignored her. Instead, he concentrated all his venom on me, the softie, the liberal, the defender of child molesters. "What do you have to say about *that,* Mr. Special Constable Bascombe?"

"Only that Colin was a friend to the children and that he had no reason to harm anyone."

"Friend," DS Longbottom sneered, struggling to his feet. "We can only be thankful you're not regular police, Mr. Bascombe," he said, nodding to himself in acknowledgement of his own wisdom. "That we can."

"So what are you going to do?" I asked.

DS Longbottom looked at his watch and frowned. Either he was trying to work out what it meant when the little hand and the big hand were in the positions they were in, or he was squinting because of poor eyesight. "I'll have a word with this here Colin Gormond. Other than that, there's not much more we can do tonight. First thing tomorrow morning, we'll drag the canal." He got to the door, turned, pointed to the windows, and said, "And

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

don't forget to put up your blackout curtains, ma'am, or you'll have the ARP man to answer to."

Mary Critchley burst into floods of tears again.

Even the soft dawn light could do nothing for the canal. It oozed through the city like an open sewer, oil slicks shimmering like rainbows in the sun, brown water dotted with industrial scum and suds, bits of driftwood and paper wrappings floating along with them. On one side was Ezekiel Woodruff's scrap yard. Old Woodruff was a bit of an eccentric. He used to come around the streets with his horse and cart yelling, "Any old iron," but now the government had other uses for scrap metal—supposedly to be used in aircraft manufacture—poor old Woodruff didn't have any way to make his living anymore. He'd already sent old Nell the carthorse to the knacker's yard, where she was probably doing her bit for the war effort by helping to make the glue to stick the aircraft together. Old mangles and bits of broken furniture stuck up from the ruins of the scrap yard like shattered artillery after a battle.

On the other side, the bank rose steeply towards the backs of the houses on Canal Road, and the people who lived there seemed to regard it as their personal tip. Flies and wasps buzzed around old Hessian sacks and paper bags full of God knew what. A couple of buckled bicycle tires and a wheelless pram completed the picture.

I stood and watched as Longbottom supervised the dragging, a slow and laborious process that seemed to be sucking all manner of unwholesome objects to the surface—except Johnny Critchley's body.

I felt tense. At any moment I half expected the cry to come from one of the policemen in the boats that they had found him, half expected to see the small, pathetic bundle bob above the water's surface. I didn't think Colin Gormond had done anything to Johnny—nor Maurice, though DS Longbottom had seemed suspicious of him, too, but I did think that, given how upset he was, Johnny might just have jumped in. He never struck me as the suicidal type, but I have no idea whether suicide enters the minds of nine-year-olds. All I knew was that he *was* upset about his father, and he *was* last seen skulking by the canal.

So I stood around with DS Longbottom and the rest as the day grew warmer, and there was still no sign of Johnny. After about three hours, the police gave up and went for bacon and eggs at Betty's Cafe over on Chadwick Road. They didn't invite me, and I was grateful to be spared both the unpleasant food and company. I stood and stared into the greasy water a while longer, unsure whether it was a good sign or not that Johnny wasn't in the canal, then I decided to go and have a chat with Colin Gormond.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

❖ ❖ ❖

"What is it, Colin?" I asked him gently. "Come on. You can tell me."

But Colin continued to stand with his back turned to me in the dark corner of his cramped living room, hands to his face, making eerie snuffling sounds, shaking his head. It was bright daylight outside, but the blackout curtains were still drawn tightly, and not a chink of light crept between their edges. I had already tried the light switch, but either Colin had removed the bulb or he didn't have one.

"Come on, Colin. This is silly. You know me. I'm Mr. Bascombe. I won't hurt you. Tell me what happened."

Finally, Colin turned silently and moved out of his corner with his funny, shuffling way of walking. Someone said he had a club-foot, and someone else said he'd had a lot of operations on his feet when he was a young lad, but nobody knew for certain why he walked the way he did. When he sat down and lit a cigarette, the match light illuminated his large nose, shiny forehead, and watery blue eyes. He used the same match to light a candle on the table beside him, and then I saw them: the black eye, the bruise on his left cheek. DS Longbottom. The bastard.

"Did you say anything to him?" I asked, anxious that DS Longbottom might have beaten a confession out of Colin, without even thinking that Colin probably wouldn't still be at home if that were the case.

He shook his head mournfully. "Nothing, Mr. Bascombe. Honest. There was nothing I *could* tell him."

"Did you see Johnny Critchley yesterday, Colin?"

"Aye."

"Where?"

"Down by the canal."

"What was he doing?"

"Just standing there chucking stones in the water."

"Did you talk to him?"

Colin paused and turned away before answering, "No."

I had a brief coughing spell, his cigarette smoke working on my gassed lungs. When it cleared up, I said, "Colin, there's something you're not telling me, isn't there? You'd better tell me. You know I won't hurt you, and I just might be the only person who can help you."

He looked at me, pale eyes imploring. "I only called out to him, from the bridge, like, didn't I?"

"What happened next?"

"Nothing. I swear it."

"Did he answer?"

"No. He just looked my way and shook his head. I could tell then that he didn't want to play. He seemed sad."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"He'd just heard his dad's been killed."

Colin's already watery eyes brimmed with tears. "Poor lad."

I nodded. For all I knew, Colin might have been thinking about *his* dad, too. Not many knew it, but Mr. Gormond senior had been killed in the same bloody war that left me with my bad lungs and scarred face. "What happened next, Colin?"

Colin shook his head and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. "Nothing," he said. "It was such a lovely day, I just went on walking. I went to the park and watched the soldiers digging trenches, then I went for my cigarettes and came home to listen to the wireless."

"And after that?"

"I stayed in."

"All evening?"

"That's right. Sometimes I go down to the White Rose, but . . ."

"But what, Colin?"

"Well, Mr. Smedley, you know, the Air-Raid Precautions man?"

I nodded. "I know him."

"He said my blackout cloth wasn't good enough and he'd fine me if I didn't get some proper stuff by yesterday."

"I understand, Colin." Good-quality, thick, impenetrable blackout cloth had become both scarce and expensive, which was no doubt why Colin had been cheated in the first place.

"Anyway, what with that and the cigarettes . . ."

I reached into my pocket and slipped out a few bob for him. Colin looked away, ashamed, but I put it on the table and he didn't tell me to take it back. I knew how it must hurt his pride to accept charity, but I had no idea how much money he made, or how he made it. I'd never seen him beg, but I had a feeling he survived on odd jobs and lived very much from hand to mouth.

I stood up. "All right, Colin," I said. "Thanks very much." I paused at the door, uncertain how to say what had just entered my mind. Finally, I blundered ahead. "It might be better if you kept a low profile till they find him, Colin. You know what some of the people around here are like."

"What do you mean, Mr. Bascombe?"

"Just be careful, Colin, that's all I mean. Just be careful."

He nodded gormlessly, and I left.

As I was leaving Colin's house, I noticed Jack Blackwell standing on his doorstep, arms folded, a small crowd of locals around him, their shadows intersecting on the cobbled street. They kept glancing towards Colin's house, and when they saw me come out, they all shuffled off except Jack himself, who gave me a grim stare before [illegible] inside and slamming his door. I felt a shiver go up my spine, as if a goose had stepped on my grave, as my dear mother

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

used to say, bless her soul, and when I got home I couldn't concentrate on my book one little bit.

By the following morning, when Johnny had been missing over thirty-six hours, the mood in the street had started to turn ugly. In my experience, when you get right down to it, there's no sorrier spectacle, nothing much worse or more dangerous, than the human mob mentality. After all, armies are nothing more than mobs, really, even when they are organized to a greater or lesser degree. I'd been at Ypres, as you know, and there wasn't a hell of a lot you could tell me about military organization. So when I heard the muttered words on doorsteps, saw the little knots of people here and there, Jack Blackwell flitting from door to door like a political canvasser, I had to do something, and I could hardly count on any help from DS Longbottom.

One thing I had learned both as a soldier and as a schoolteacher was that, if you had a chance, your best bet was to take out the ringleader. That meant Jack Blackwell. Jack was the nasty type, and he and I had had more than one run-in over his son Nick's bullying and poor performance in class. In my opinion, young Nick was the sort of walking dead loss who should probably have been drowned at birth, a waste of skin, sinew, tissue, and bone, and it wasn't hard to see where he got it from. Nick's older brother, Dave, was already doing a long stretch in the Scrubs for beating a night watchman senseless during a robbery, and even the army couldn't find an excuse to spring him and enlist his service in killing Germans. Mrs. Blackwell had been seen more than once walking with difficulty, with bruises on her cheek. The sooner Jack Blackwell got his call-up papers, the better things would be all around.

I intercepted Jack between the Deakins' and the Kellys' houses, and it was clear from his gruff, "What do you want?" that he didn't want to talk to me.

But I was adamant.

"Morning, Jack," I greeted him. "Lovely day for a walk, isn't it?"

"What's it to you?"

"Just being polite. What are you up to, Jack? What's going on?"

"None of your business."

"Up to your old tricks? Spreading poison?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." He made to walk away, but I grabbed his arm. He glared at me but didn't do anything. Just as well. At my age, and with my lungs, I'd hardly last ten seconds in a fight. "Jack," I said, "don't you think you'd all be best off using your time to look for the poor lad?"

"Look for him! That's a laugh. You know as well as I do where that young lad is."

"Where? Where is he, Jack?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You know."

"No, I don't. Tell me."

"He's dead and buried, that's what."

"Where, Jack?"

"I don't know the exact spot. If he's not in the canal, then he's buried somewhere not far away."

"Maybe he is. But you don't *know* that. Not for certain. And even if you believe that, you don't know who put him there."

Jack wrenched his arm out of my weakening grip and sneered. "I've got a damn sight better idea than you have, Frank Bascombe. With all your *book* learning!" Then he turned and marched off.

Somehow, I got the feeling that I had just made things worse.

After my brief fracas with Jack Blackwell, I was at a loose end. I knew the police would still be looking for Johnny, asking questions, searching areas of waste ground, so there wasn't much I could do to help them. Feeling impotent, I went down to the canal, near Woodruff's scrap yard. Old Ezekiel Woodruff himself was poking around in the ruins of his business, so I decided to talk to him. I kept my distance, though, for even on a hot day such as this, Woodruff was wearing his greatcoat and black wool gloves with the fingers cut off. He wasn't known for his personal hygiene, so I made sure I didn't stand downwind of him. Not that there was much of a wind, but then it didn't take much.

"Morning, Ezekiel," I said. "I understand young Johnny Critchley was down around here yesterday."

"So they say," muttered Ezekiel.

"See him, did you?"

"I weren't here."

"So you didn't see him?"

"Police have already been asking questions."

"And what did you tell them?"

He pointed to the other side of the canal, the back of the housing estate. "I were over there," he said. "Sometimes people chuck out summat of value, even these days."

"But you did see Johnny?"

He paused, then said, "Aye."

"On this side of the canal?"

Woodruff nodded.

"What time was this?"

"I don't have a watch, but it weren't long after that daft bloke had gone by."

"Do you mean Colin Gormond?"

"Aye, that's the one."

So Johnny was still alone by the canal *after* Colin had passed by. DS Longbottom had probably known this, but he had beaten Colin

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

anyway. One day I'd find a way to get even with him. The breeze shifted a little and I got a whiff of stale sweat and worse. "What was Johnny doing?"

"Doing? Nowt special. He were just walking."

"Walking? Where?"

Woodruff pointed. "That way. Towards the city centre."

"Alone?"

"Aye."

"And nobody approached him?"

"Nope. Not while I were watching."

I didn't think there was anything further to be got from Ezekiel Woodruff, so I bade him good morning. I can't say the suspicion didn't enter my head that *he* might have had something to do with Johnny's disappearance, though I'd have been hard pushed to say exactly why or what. Odd though old Woodruff might be, there had never been any rumour or suspicion of his being overly interested in young boys, and I didn't want to jump to conclusions the way Jack Blackwell had. Still, I filed away my suspicions for later.

A fighter droned overhead. I watched it dip and spin through the blue air and wished I could be up there. I'd always regretted not being a pilot in the war. A barge full of soldiers drifted by, and I moved aside on the towpath to let the horse that was pulling it pass by. For my troubles I got a full blast of sweaty horseflesh and a pile of steaming manure at my feet. That had even Ezekiel Woodruff beat.

Aimlessly, I followed the direction Ezekiel had told me Johnny had walked in—towards the city centre. As I walked, Jack Blackwell's scornful words about my inability to find Johnny echoed in my mind. *Book learning.* That was exactly the kind of cheap insult you would expect from a moron like Jack Blackwell, but it hurt nonetheless. No sense telling him I'd been buried in the mud under the bodies of my comrades for two days. No sense telling him about the young German soldier I'd surprised and bayonetted to death, twisting the blade until it snapped and broke off inside him. Jack Blackwell was too young to have seen action in the last war, but if there was any justice in the world, he'd damn well see it in *this* one.

The canal ran by the back of the train station, where I crossed the narrow bridge and walked through the crowds of evacuees out front to City Square. Mary Critchley's anguish reverberated in my mind, too: *"Mr. Bashcombe! Mr. Bashcombe!"* I heard her call.

Then, all of a sudden, as I looked at the black facade of the post office and the statue of the Black Prince in the centre of City Square, it hit me. I thought I knew what had happened to Johnny Critchley, but first I had to go back to his street and ask just one important question.

❖ ❖ ❖

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It was late morning. The station smelt of damp soot and warm oil. Crowds of children thronged around trying to find out where they were supposed to go. They wore name tags and carried little cardboard boxes. Adults with clipboards, for the most part temporarily unemployed schoolteachers and local volunteers, directed them to the right queue, and their names were ticked off as they boarded the carriages.

Despite being neither an evacuated child nor a supervisor, I managed to buy a ticket and ended up sharing a compartment with a rather severe-looking woman in a brown uniform I didn't recognize, and a male civilian with a brush moustache and a lot of Brylcreem on his hair. They seemed to be in charge of several young children, also in the compartment, who couldn't sit still. I could hardly blame them. They were going to the alien countryside, to live with strangers, far away from their parents, for only God knew how long, and the idea scared them half to death.

The buttoned cushions were warm and the air in the carriage still and close, despite the open window. When we finally set off, the motion stirred up a bit of a breeze, which helped a little. On the wall opposite me was a poster of the Scarborough seafront, and I spent most of the journey remembering the carefree childhood holidays I had enjoyed there with my parents in the early years of the century: another world, another time. The rest of the trip, I glanced out of the window, beyond the scum-scabbed canal, and saw the urban industrial landscape drift by: back gardens, where some people had put in Anderson shelters, half-covered with earth to grow vegetables on; the dark mass of the town-hall clock tower behind the city-centre buildings; a factory yard, where several men were loading heavy crates onto a lorry, flushed and sweating in the heat.

Then we were in the countryside, where the smells of grass, hay, and manure displaced the reek of the city. I saw small, squat farms, drystone walls, sheep and cattle grazing. Soon, train tracks and canal diverged. We went under a long noisy tunnel, and the children whimpered. Later, I was surprised to see so many army convoys winding along the narrow roads, and the one big aerodrome we passed seemed buzzing with activity.

All in all, the journey took a little over two hours. Only about ten or eleven children were shepherded off at the small country station, and I followed as they were met and taken to the village hall, where the men and women who were to care for them waited. It was more civilized than some of the evacuation systems I'd heard about, which sounded more like the slave markets of old, where farmers waited on the platforms to pick out the strong lads, and local dignitaries whisked away the nicely dressed boys and girls.

I went up to the volunteer in charge, an attractive young countrywoman in a simple blue frock with a white lace collar and a belt

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

around her slim waist, and asked her if she had any record of an evacuee called John, or Johnny, Critchley. She checked her records, then shook her head, as I knew she would. If I were right, Johnny wouldn't be here under his own name. I explained my problem to the woman, who told me her name was Phyllis Rigby. She had a yellow ribbon in her long wavy hair and smelled of fresh apples. "I don't see how anything like that could have happened," Phyllis said. "We've been very meticulous. But there again, things *have* been a little chaotic." She frowned in thought for a moment, then she delegated her present duties to another volunteer.

"Come on," she said, "I'll help you go from house to house. There weren't that many evacuees, you know. Far fewer than we expected."

I nodded. I'd heard how a lot of parents weren't bothering to evacuate their children. "They can't see anything happening yet," I said. "Just you wait. After the first air raid you'll have so many you won't have room for them all."

Phyllis smiled. "The poor things. It must be such an upheaval for them."

"Indeed."

I took deep, welcome breaths of country air as Phyllis and I set out from the village hall to visit the families listed on her clipboard. There were perhaps a couple of hundred houses, and less than fifty percent had received evacuees. Even so, we worked up quite a sweat calling at them all. Or I did, rather, as sweating didn't seem to be in Phyllis's nature. We chatted as we went, me telling her about my school-teaching, and her telling me about her husband, Thomas, training as a fighter pilot in the RAF. After an hour or so with no luck, we stopped in at her cottage for a refreshing cup of tea, then we were off again.

At last, late in the afternoon, we struck gold.

Mr. and Mrs. Douglas, who were billeting Johnny Critchley, seemed a very pleasant couple, and they were sad to hear that they would not get to keep him with them for a while longer. I explained everything to them and assured them that they would get someone else as soon as we got the whole business sorted out.

"He's *not* here," Johnny said as we walked with Phyllis to the station. "I've looked everywhere, but I couldn't find him."

I shook my head. "Sorry, Johnny. You know your mum's got a speech impediment. That was why I had to go back and ask her exactly what she said to you before I came here. She said she told you your father was missing in action, which, the way it came out, sounded like missing in *Acksham,* didn't it? That's why you came here, isn't it, to look for your father?"

Young Johnny nodded, tears in his eyes. "I'm sorry," he said. "I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

couldn't understand why she didn't come and look for him. She must be really vexed with me."

I patted his shoulder. "I don't think so. More like she'll be glad to see you. How did you manage to sneak in with the real evacuees, by the way?"

Johnny wiped his eyes with his grubby sleeve. "At the station. There were so many people standing around, at first I didn't know . . . Then I saw a boy I knew from playing cricket on the rec."

"Oliver Bradley," I said. The boy whose name Johnny was registered under.

"Yes. He goes to Broad Hill."

I nodded. Though I had never heard of Oliver Bradley, I knew the school; it was just across the valley from us. "Go on."

"I asked him where he was going, and he said he was being sent to Acksham. It was perfect."

"But how did you get him to change places with you?"

"He didn't want to. Not at first."

"How did you persuade him?"

Johnny looked down at the road and scraped at some gravel with the scuffed tip of his shoe. "It cost me a complete set of 'Great Cricketers' cigarette cards. Ones my dad gave me before he went away."

I smiled. It would have to be something like that.

"And I made him promise not to tell anyone, just to go home and say there wasn't room for him and he'd have to try again in a few days. I just needed enough time to find Dad . . . you know."

"I know."

We arrived at the station, where Johnny sat on the bench and Phyllis and I chatted in the late afternoon sunlight, our shadows lengthening across the tracks. In addition to the birds singing in the trees and hedgerows, I could hear grasshoppers chirruping, a sound you rarely heard in the city. I had often thought how much I would like to live in the country, and perhaps when I retired from teaching a few years in the future I would be able to do so.

We didn't have long to wait for our train. I thanked Phyllis for all her help, told her I wished her husband well, and she waved to us as the old banger chugged out of the station.

It was past blackout when I finally walked into our street holding Johnny's hand. He was tired after his adventure and had spent most of the train journey with his head on my shoulder. Once or twice, from the depths of a dream, he had called his father's name.

I could sense that something was wrong as soon as I turned the corner. It was nothing specific, just a sudden chill at the back of my neck. Because of the blackout, I couldn't see anything clearly, but I got a strong impression of a knot of shifting shadows, just a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

little bit darker than the night itself, milling around outside Colin Gormond's house.

I quickened my step, and as I got nearer I heard a whisper pass through the crowd when they saw Johnny. Then the shadows began to disperse, slinking and sidling away, disappearing like smoke into the air. From somewhere, Mary Critchley lurched forward with a cry and took young Johnny in her arms. I let him go. I could hear her thanking me between sobs, but I couldn't stop walking.

The first thing I noticed when I approached Colin's house was that the window was broken and half the blackout curtain had been ripped away. Next, I saw that the door was slightly ajar. I was worried that Colin might be hurt, but out of courtesy I knocked and called out his name.

Nothing.

I pushed the door open and walked inside. It was pitch dark. I didn't have a torch with me, and I knew that Colin's light didn't work, but I remembered the matches and the candle on the table. I lit it and held it up before me as I walked forward.

I didn't have far to look. If I hadn't had the candle, I might have bumped right into him. First I saw his face, about level with mine. His froth-specked lips had turned blue, and a trickle of dried blood ran from his left nostril. The blackout cloth was knotted around his neck in a makeshift noose, attached to a hook screwed into the lintel over the kitchen door. As I stood back and examined the scene further, I saw that his downturned toes were about three inches from the floor, and there was no sign of an upset chair or stool.

Harmless Colin Gormond, friend to the local children. Dead.

I felt the anger well up in me, along with the guilt. It was my fault. I shouldn't have gone dashing off to Acksham like that in search of Johnny, or I should at least have taken Colin with me. I knew the danger he was in; I had talked to Jack Blackwell before I left. How could I have been so stupid, so careless as to leave Colin to his fate with only a warning he didn't understand?

Maybe Colin *had* managed to hang himself somehow, without standing on a stool, though I doubted it. But whether or not Jack Blackwell or the rest had actually laid a finger on him, they were all guilty of driving him to it in my book. Besides, if Jack or anyone else from the street *had* strung Colin up, there would be evidence—fibres, fingerprints, footprints, whatever—and even DS bloody Longbottom wouldn't be able to ignore that.

I stumbled outside and made my way towards the telephone box on the corner. Not a soul stirred now, but as I went I heard one door—Jack Blackwell's door—close softly this time, as if he thought that too much noise might wake the dead, and the dead might have a tale or two to tell. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

DADDY'S BOY

by Donald Olson

There are usually fine lines to be found in Donald Olson's stories: that between the innocent and the sinister, or the serendipitous and the calculated, for instance. And more often than not, what determines which side of the line characters and events end up on is pure coincidence. Mr. Olson's skill can be seen in the way he allows coincidence to move the story along, giving his characters a nudge here and there until a desperate act occurs. . . . †

They were living in Brickfield when Robbie's father died of an aneurysm. Peter Ives was only thirty-four; Robbie was eight. Their relationship had been one of extraordinary empathy. As an adult, Peter had not lost that spirit of boyish playfulness that preserved his vision of what it was like to be an adolescent. This may in part have explained his success as an illustrator of children's books, and working at home he saw as much of Robbie as did his wife, Ardith.

Peter's untimely death produced such a drastic change in Robbie that Ardith's concern for his health led her to consult a child psychologist, who tried to reassure her. "You must understand that Robbie has suffered a devastating loss. You say he and his father were very close."

"Too close, I sometimes think."

He asked what she meant. Ardith tried to explain. "He was always Daddy's boy, and Peter was more than a father to Robbie. He was a playmate, a confidant. They were like children together. I sometimes felt quite jealous."

"It's not uncommon, Mrs. Ives, for a child to form an exceptionally strong bond with one parent. Be patient. Time will restore his emotional balance."

When summer came and Robbie remained despondent and withdrawn, Ardith decided it would be wise to move. The house was too full of memories as well as being too big for them. She began looking around for something more modest, preferably in the country but not remote.

©2000 by Donald Olson

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She found a house on the outskirts of the village of East Wickham, midway between Brickfield and the Bay, a ranch-style house with woodland on two sides and a solid wall of conifers hiding it from the neighboring property on the third.

"You can have a dog," Ardith promised. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"I guess," replied Robbie without enthusiasm. It was their first day in the new house. Once settled in, Robbie went exploring, returning in somewhat higher spirits than he'd been in since Peter's death.

"Mumsy, you should see it. It's awesome."

"What is, darling?"

"A tree house, in that big old oak tree. Come on, I'll show you."

The oak tree, deep within a copse of silver birches, must have been at least a century old. The tree house, no more than a wide platform of timbers high up among the topmost branches, was reached not by boards nailed to the massive trunk but by an ingeniously built series of narrow steps.

"Be careful, darling, I don't want you falling."

"No chance," Robbie cried, urging her to follow him.

That he wanted her to share his discovery so delighted Ardith she would have risked the most treacherous ascent. For once she was not to be left out, as she might have been had Peter been there to share Robbie's excitement.

From the platform they had a clear view over the tops of the conifers to the neighboring house, Spanish style with a red-tiled roof.

"Look," said Robbie, "they've even got a swimming pool." Even though it was empty.

The house appeared deserted, not that it would have mattered; no one could have spotted them high up among the leaves.

The following day Robbie came in the house bursting with news. "Guess what, Mumsy. The house isn't deserted. I saw the man who lives there. And you know what? He looks a lot like Daddy."

"Darling, you ought not to spy on him. It's not nice."

"He can't see me."

"That's why it's not nice."

Nice or not, watching the man next door proved far more interesting than birdwatching, a hobby Ardith had tried to encourage. Apparently the man lived alone. Only once did Robbie see him leave the house in a battered old Jeep and return with a bag of groceries. Once Robbie saw a mailman stop at the house, but no one else. Most of the time the man lay beside the empty pool reading or sunbathing or engaged in a daily regimen of calisthenics.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Robbie admired him for this, just as he'd admired his father for refusing to forgo his daily stint of jogging, regardless of the weather.

But what Robbie found so enthralling, so truly uncanny, was the man's resemblance to Daddy. The same unruly blond hair and slim athletic build, the quick, light way he moved, and certain gestures like tugging at a lock of hair as he sat reading his book. They might have been twins, Daddy and the man next door, at least so it appeared from a distance.

Came a day when Robbie's curiosity refused to remain unsatisfied. He yearned to talk to the man, discover if, in fact, he was as much like Daddy as he looked.

The man must have been dozing behind his dark glasses, for he didn't react to Robbie's presence until the boy cleared his throat as he looked down upon him, whereupon he came awake with a sudden jerk of his head. "Good God," he exclaimed, "where did you come from?"

"I'm Robbie Ives. I live next door."

"Do you now, sport? I'm Dex. Pleased to meet you."

His voice, with its note of mocking good humor, and his smile brought Daddy instantly to mind. In fact, it was as much in the expressiveness of his features as in his overall appearance that Robbie recognized an exciting likeness. And to be called sport, the very term Daddy so often used. Uncanny.

Robbie pointed back above the conifers. "I saw you from up there."

"Up there?"

"From my treehouse. I wasn't spying. I watch birds."

"Fun, is it?"

"Not much. We just moved here, me and my mom. My dad died." Looking around, he discovered why the pool was empty. A deep jagged crack reached from one end to the other, while the house, close up, was somewhat dilapidated. Nevertheless, to be polite, Robbie said, "I like your house."

"It's not mine. I'm renting it for the summer."

A cloud dimmed Robbie's pleasure. "You mean you'll be going away?"

Dex grinned. "I'm a going-away kind of guy."

This news was keenly disappointing, but then summer wasn't half gone. "You work here? Daddy worked at home."

"I'm between jobs. A sort of rest cure."

Robbie studied the man's face for telltale signs of illness. "You're not sick, are you? You don't look sick." But then neither had Daddy, right up to the day he died.

The man slapped his bare chest resoundingly. "Me? No way. Healthy as a horse."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Robbie had never seen anyone other than Dex about the place; still, he wanted to be sure. He asked if Dex was married.

"No, man. Are you?"

"No!" He could tell Dex liked to tease. So did Daddy.

He found Ardith in the kitchen polishing the silver while the radio played softly in the background. Robbie picked up a silver bowl and studied his face, distorted as in a funhouse mirror.

"Mumsy, do you think they ever come back?"

"Do who come back?"

"People that die."

"You mean like ghosts?"

"No, like for real. But not quite the same. Like with other names."

"That's called reincarnation. Some folks believe in it."

"Do you?" he asked gravely.

"It makes more sense than some things."

In his room, Robbie searched his photograph album for one particular snapshot his mother had taken of himself and Daddy on the beach at Margate. He was right. Daddy in swimming trunks lying on the sand looked very much like Dex lounging beside the cracked swimming pool.

Robbie led the way through the sharp-scented conifers to the base of the oak tree.

"Hey, super," said Dex, looking up. "Did you build it?"

Robbie giggled. Like Daddy, Dex was always making such remarks straight-faced, as if he were serious. "Are you kidding? It was here when we came."

Dex climbed to the platform as nimbly as Robbie. Sitting cross-legged beside Dex, Robbie felt the same quiet thrill of those intimate moments shared with his father. The two of them, he and Dex, all alone in this secret place high above the world.

"With a sleeping bag and provisions," said Dex, "a guy could hide out up here till snow flies."

Before Robbie could reply, his mother's voice floated up from below. "Robbie? Darling, are you up there?"

Robbie touched Dex's strong brown arm. "It's Mumsy. Come on down. You can meet her."

On the ground Ardith wrapped a protective arm around Robbie and looked uncertainly at Dex.

"This is Dex," Robbie said proudly. "I was showing him the tree house."

"Pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Ives."

Ardith smiled politely. "I'm afraid Robbie's making an awful pest of himself."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Not at all. I enjoy his company."

"Darling, lunch is all ready."

"Good. I'm starved. Can Dex eat with us?"

"It's only sloppy Joes. I'm sure he—"

"You like sloppy Joes, don't you, Dex? Daddy did."

"Love 'em, but I don't think—"

"Please? It's okay, isn't it, Mumsy?"

Ardith looked at Dex with a helpless smile. "Of course, if he wishes. Go wash up first."

They ate at the glass-topped table in the breezeway. Ardith felt somewhat awkward, grateful for Robbie's stream of chatter. She hadn't seen him this animated since before Peter died. It gave her a queer sense of déjà vu, vaguely unsettling, perhaps because Robbie had been right about Dex. He was disturbingly remindful of Peter, in manner as well as appearance.

"He misses his father dreadfully," she said to Dex while Robbie was removing the dishes to the kitchen. "They were very close."

"I never knew my dad," said Dex, "and I haven't any kids. I wish I did have."

Ardith forbore to ask what Dex did for a living. Despite his friendly manner, there was a reticence about him she felt obliged to respect.

As soon as he'd left, Robbie hastened to make sure his mother shared his approval of their neighbor. "Wasn't I right, Mumsy? Isn't he just like Daddy?"

"Darling, we hardly know him."

"He's a great guy. How could you not like him?"

Ardith laughed at his accusing tone. "I didn't say I didn't like him. But he's a stranger. One mustn't be too hasty in forming opinions."

Robbie gave her a knowing, precocious smile. "He likes you. I could tell."

Dex taught Robbie how to do the aerobic exercises he'd learned in the military. He preached the importance of keeping fit. Robbie strained and sweated in the afternoon heat beside the pool, hoping that by summer's end his noodly muscles would be as firm as Dex's and his body as richly tanned.

"What did you do in the army, Dex?"

"I was a demolitions man. You know what that is?"

"You blew things up?"

"I learned how. I was never in combat."

Although Ardith had told Robbie not to be too inquisitive, he asked Dex how he now earned his living.

"You name it, sport, I've done it."

"You could find a job around here."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Not my kind of job," said Dex with a wink. "I'm a specialist."

Frequently now, as the summer days lengthened, Dex was prevailed upon to share meals with Robbie and Ardith, and though he could talk amusingly about various places he'd visited, not even Ardith's discreet probing brought forth any reminiscences about family or friends, past ventures, or plans for the future. Ardith wondered if he might have suffered some personal loss as devastating as her own and kept waiting for him to overcome his reserve, but he never did.

As the weeks passed, Ardith began to observe a mood of mounting anxiety in Robbie whenever he talked about Dex and his plans to move away.

"I'll bet if you were very nice to him, Mumsy, he wouldn't go away. I mean *very* nice, like you were to Daddy."

"But, darling, that's not possible. I loved Daddy."

"I think Daddy would want you to be nice to him. For my sake."

Ardith gave him an impulsive hug. "Oh, sweetie, what funny things you say."

Robbie saw nothing funny about it. They were alone in the world. So was Dex. If they were a family, life would be just the way it was before, when Daddy was alive.

Robbie's birthday came on the Fourth of July, which had always made it an extra-special occasion; a party with cake and presents and fireworks in the backyard. Ardith wanted to make this birthday as much like all the others as possible.

"We'll invite Uncle Frank and Aunt Betsy. They'll be glad to come."

"No," said Robbie, "I don't want them. I just want you and me and Dex."

"Oh, baby, it wouldn't be right not to ask Uncle Frank and Aunt Betsy. And you don't know if Dex would come."

"Please, Mumsy. It's *my* birthday. I just want it to be the three of us. Like it was when Daddy was alive."

Ardith could not resist so plaintive an appeal. Besides, Frank and Betsy might not want to drive so far, although Ardith was sure they'd come if invited.

"Very well," she conceded. "You may ask Dex, but don't tease him. And no fireworks this year."

"I bet Dex could make fireworks. He was a demolitions man in the army."

Robbie lost no time in conveying the invitation to Dex and was not disappointed. He'd known Dex would come. He wouldn't miss it any more than Daddy would have.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I suppose that means a present," said Dex teasingly. "What would you like?"

"Fireworks!"

Robbie laughed at Dex's startled look. "Daddy always bought fireworks from this place near Brickfield, even though they're against the law."

"Bad idea, sport. Take my advice. Don't even think of doing anything against the law. Not ever."

"Then don't bring anything, Dex. Just yourself." Which was what his mother always told dinner guests who asked what they could bring.

Independence Day was as fine as had been predicted, with only fair-weather clouds feathering the clear blue sky. Robbie was up early helping his mother prepare for the party, which was to be a cookout with hamburgers and hot dogs, potato salad and baked beans and watermelon. Ardith had baked Robbie's favorite angel food cake with red, white, and blue icing and candles.

At noon, Robbie went to fetch Dex, just to be sure he hadn't forgotten.

"Not likely, sport," Dex grinned, ruffling Robbie's hair just as Daddy so often did. "I had to go into town and just got back." He looked very spruce in jeans and cowboy boots and a white T-shirt emblazoned with a sunburst design.

"We're all ready to put the burgers on the grill."

At that moment the door opened again and a woman appeared dressed in skin-tight jeans and a plaid shirt Robbie recognized as one of Dex's. She was young and had fluffy blond hair and eyes wide and green as a cat's. Robbie could only stare, slack-jawed with astonishment. The woman regarded Robbie with an amused, friendly smile.

"You must be Robbie."

Dex took her hand and drew her forward. "Robbie, this here's Janelle."

Robbie felt confused and tongue-tied, wondering who this Janelle person was, what she was doing in Dex's house.

"So it's your birthday, is it, honey? Well, happy birthday. I hear you've been taking good care of my man here."

My man. What did she mean by that? Robbie felt a stirring of resentment. All he could think to say was a mumbled, "Hullo."

Dex said, "How about it, sport? You think there'd be enough for one more guest at your shindig? Or shall we let Janelle stay here and open a can of tuna fish?"

Robbie thought that would be a great idea but didn't dare say so. "Yeah, I guess there's enough."

"Good boy. Shall we get the show on the road?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Robbie turned away, stiff-shouldered, with a sinking awareness that this special day was about to be spoiled.

Although clearly surprised by the unexpected guest, Ardith greeted her far more cordially than Robbie thought necessary. Okay to be polite, he would have expected no less of Mumsy, but did she have to be *quite* so welcoming to the intruder?

Ardith had a chance to probe the nature of the couple's relationship while Robbie and Dex were grilling the burgers and hot dogs.

"Have you known Dex long?" she asked Janelle.

"Oh sure, we go way back. Terrific guy."

"He's certainly made a hit with Robbie."

"Dex loves kids. We hope to get married and have some of our own when the time seems right."

"I'm surprised Dex never mentioned you."

Janelle laughed. "Don't be. He's never been one for personal chitchat. I wanted to come east with him but there were some loose ends to tie up. Business affairs."

"He said he'd be moving on at the end of summer."

"Or sooner. It all depends."

"Robbie will be lost without him. I think he likes to make believe Dex is his father. They're so alike in many ways, Dex and my late husband."

Standing close to Dex at the barbecue, Robbie kept shooting glances toward the table where Mumsy and Janelle seemed to be getting along like old friends.

"You feel okay, sport?" said Dex. "You've been quiet as a towheaded mouse."

"Is that why you're going away, Dex? Because of her?"

"A guy goes where the work is. Can't live on love, sport."

"You love *her?*" Robbie couldn't hide his contempt.

"She's a mighty pretty gal, don't you think?"

"Not as pretty as my mom."

"They're both pretty," said Dex. He handed Robbie the spatula. "Here, turn these babies over."

Even when it was time to blow out the candles and cut the cake, Robbie remained in what seemed almost a stupor of indifference. Only when he unwrapped Dex's present and found himself in possession of the first watch he'd ever owned did his face brighten.

"I won't ever take it off, Dex. I promise."

"Just remember who gave it to you. So cheer up now. Maybe some kids'll move in next door and you'll be showing them your tree house."

"You've got a tree house?" Janelle asked.

Robbie gave her a mute, considering look, as if debating whether to favor her with an answer or snub her altogether. And then,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

looking beyond her to where the crown of the oak tree was just visible above the birches, he replied with a polite smile, as if Ardith had silently urged him to mind his manners. "Would you like to see it?"

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Dex give her a slight nod. "Well, sure, honey," she said.

"You stay here," Robbie said to Dex. "We'll be right back."

"Wait'll I help your mom clear up," said Janelle.

Ardith waved away the offer. "You go ahead. Dex and I'll do that."

Ardith and Dex were in the kitchen or they might have heard the scream. As it was, they had no idea anything had happened until Robbie came dashing into the house.

"Come quick," he cried. "Janelle's hurt herself."

"It happened so fast," Robbie kept repeating. "She was standing up and she said she felt dizzy. She reached out for a branch but just lost her balance and fell."

By the time the sheriff and ambulance arrived it was already too late. Janelle lay dead of a broken neck.

It was a hotshot deputy who recognized Dex and Janelle. Their real names were Clayton Shaw and Jolene Nolan, and they were on the FBI's most-wanted list for blowing up an armored car in a small town outside Kansas City. One of the FBI agents who arrived at the house told Ardith a guard had been killed in the robbery. "According to witnesses, it was the woman who shot him. They split up after the robbery, apparently planning to meet up here once the heat died down."

To Ardith, it all seemed quite beyond belief. "They seemed such a pleasant, ordinary couple. My poor boy is quite shattered. He'd grown very fond of the man."

That evening Robbie responded tearfully to Ardith's efforts to console him.

"It was all my fault, Mumsy," he wailed.

"Darling, all you did was invite them to your birthday party. You couldn't have foreseen what would happen."

For only the briefest moment was he tempted to say more, but his courage failed him. The words would remain forever unspoken.

There were some things he could not expect even Mumsy to forgive. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

PREY

by Aliceanne More

Max was aware that he was starting to sweat. He could feel a damp chill on the back of his neck, and moist hot spots on his back and chest. How is that possible? he wondered. He didn't sweat when he was under pressure, no way, he was one cool guy. But then he glanced in the rearview mirror, at a reflection of the precious cargo draped across the backseat of the generic late-model white sedan, and he smiled evenly. *Yeah, okay, this is special. Maybe a little sweating is kosher this time.*

A sleek black limousine raced past him in the left lane, and Max grimaced. Way too obvious. The guy in charge had said use a limo, this is Los Angeles. But the guy was a doctor, he didn't know squat about high-risk transport. So Max had chosen this average, ordinary, American-made white sedan, one of many in the rental lot back in Studio City. This car blended right in with all the business travelers' generic rentals on Highway 405, even now, well past rush hour.

There was a whimper from the backseat. Max checked the rearview mirror and nodded to himself. Just nerves, it's okay. Nothing to worry about. Max was going to deliver this precious cargo with time to spare, just as he had promised. It was his right to do this transport, he'd been there from the start, involved in every step of planning, and now it was finally time for the big payoff. And Max had everything under control.

Aliceanne More discovered *EQMM* more than twenty years ago when a colleague of hers, Joyce Harrington, sold us *her* first story, the Edgar-winning "The Purple Shroud." "I fell in love with *EQMM* and have been an avid reader ever since," says Ms. More (who writes under a pseudonym), "and I am now fulfilling a promise I made to myself way back then: that when I was ready to submit my work to a publisher, I would start with *EQMM*."

©2000 by Aliceanne More

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

❖ ❖ ❖

"Car Nineteen, come in."

Shep watched the computer screen as multicolored icons, representing the units currently active in the field, moved in and out of precisely measured grids that overlay a map of Los Angeles. Car 19 was represented by a blue icon, and it was just entering highway 405 at Mullholland Drive, heading north towards the junction of the 405 and Hollywood freeway 101, when a male voice began speaking in Shep's headset.

"Car Nineteen, Captain, just entering highway Four-oh-five North at Mullholland."

"We see you. Any sign of him?" Shep asked.

"Not yet. Do we have a confirmation on the auto?"

"Negative. We think he stopped at a rental lot in Studio City, but we're still waiting for confirmation. Meanwhile, focus on looking for the vehicles we know he has used in the past, the black Jeep Cherokee and the green BMW."

"Roger, Car Nineteen out."

A blond young man seated at the computer console in front of Shep shook his head and grunted. "This is nuts," he grumbled. "This new van can do anything, it even has a satellite hookup, but still we have to wait for some idiot rental-car guy to look through credit-card receipts," he scoffed.

Shep smiled. "Yeah, rookie, but once we do have confirmation on the car, this new buggy will make up for any time we lost."

The young man grinned. "Damn straight. He won't know what hit him."

"Just keep your eyes and attention on the equipment, Larson, and let me know as soon as Car Seventeen and Car Twenty-two are in range on the southern and eastern perimeters."

"Check," Larson said, leaning forward with concentration, his eyes glued to the computer console.

Traffic was fairly light. Max was well past the crest of the Santa Monica Mountains and was tempted to speed, but he knew better. He would do nothing that would attract attention to this ordinary white sedan. Looking at his watch, he nodded with satisfaction. Right on schedule.

A sharp whimper from the backseat was followed by a shaky sigh. She was getting scared. But she was secure back there, he'd made certain of that, two sets of seat belts crossed over a blanket that covered her up to her nose. Nothing to worry about.

Max reached to turn on the radio, thinking a little country music might calm her down some, when he heard a distinctive motor sound. He leaned forward, looking up through the windshield, and saw exactly what he expected to see: a helicopter. He

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sat back quickly, but then he exhaled slow and deep, settling down again. Just a traffic helicopter, probably. They were always checking the 405, even at off hours. Nothing to worry about.

Larson tapped on the window between the cab of the van and the equipment suite in back. "Yo, Captain?"

Shep turned in the cab and squinted attentively into the young man's eyes, which were buzzing with excitement. "Yeah?"

"Car Seventeen and Car Twenty-two in range, Captain, and we have confirmation on the car, and Bird One is in the air," Larson said in a rush.

Shep nodded and climbed into the back of the van, following Larson to the computer console. As Larson sat down at his engineer's position, Shep checked the location of the three cars on the grid-lined screen and noted the addition of Bird 1, the newly outfitted four-man helicopter, over highway 405.

"Good. Everyone's in place. Tell me about the car," Shep said.

"White Buick Park Avenue sedan, this year's model. California license number AG one-one-oh-two," Larson recited.

"Have you given the specs to the guys in the field?" Shep asked automatically, although he knew the answer.

"Yes, just now. Bird One is doing a sweep going south." Then Larson sighed, and his voice turned glum. "With so little traffic, this is going to be too easy."

Shep smiled. "Don't turn off the juice just yet, kid. You're a rookie, so let me spell it out for you. No one relaxes until we have him. There's a million canyon roads up here, and Max knows most of them. If he figures out we're on his trail, anything can happen."

"C'mon, Captain. With this rig on our side? And all the stuff loaded on the cars? Not to mention Bird One, c'mon," Larson objected.

"The best stuff loaded in those cars are the people in them, kid. Six of the best people in the country. It's a new team, this is the first week out for them as a team, and every one of them is hungry for action. You wait and see. The equipment is great, kid, it's good to have great tools, but eventually it comes down to you and your target, period," Shep explained.

"Yeah, okay." Larson grinned. "Still, I hope he spots us."

It's not a traffic helicopter. It's them. Max peered up through the windshield for the tenth time in five minutes, squinting against the glare of the helicopter's powerful headlights, and cursed quietly but with feeling. He'd heard about the new equipment they had, including a refitted Apache helicopter and some sort of damn van that was like Houston Mission Control on wheels.

Okay, so they'd figured out his route somehow. That was a possibility, he knew that could happen. But they'd be looking for the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Jeep Cherokee or the BMW, not this ordinary white sedan. They'd never think to check rental-car agencies in Studio City, no way. Nothing to worry about.

Max glanced over his shoulder into the backseat. She was sweating now, and struggling against the blanket and the seat belts. He called back to her, "No use being brave, sweetheart, let go with some noise if it will help, I can take it."

He saw her glare at his reflection in the rearview mirror. "Go to hell, buddy," she muttered softly.

Max grinned. He loved this woman's spirit. Double-belt restrained, covered up, completely out of control of the situation, and yet her reflex was to tell him where to go.

The distinctive sound of the helicopter motor suddenly grew louder, and Max looked up to see it face off against him from the north and then start moving slowly in reverse. Spotting him? Damn. Damn it. They couldn't have found him, they didn't know about the white sedan. Unless they found the rental agency. In Studio City? Damn.

"Bird One reporting, Captain."

"Yes, Bird One, go ahead," said Shep, while Larson listened on his own headset, his eyes glued to the console.

"Confirmed target, and maintaining standard spotting position from the north. Cars Nineteen and Twenty-two in pursuit," the pilot's gravelly voice went on, crackling with adrenaline.

"Roger, Bird One. They see him. Increase your elevation to keep your lights out of range of oncoming traffic, per regulations. Then hang on, in place, until we have him sandwiched good and solid," Shep said evenly.

"Roger and Bird One out."

Shep smiled. "Ace was a Marine pilot during the Gulf War, and he can't stop sounding like one," he explained absently.

Larson nodded to the computer screen above his console. "Look, Car Twenty-two must be nearly on him," he said, his voice straining with excitement.

The damn helicopter was leaving. They hadn't spotted him, after all. Max heaved a stiff sigh, more relieved than he wanted to admit. Must have been some kind of broad, shotgun search. The arrogant bastards.

Max began rounding a curve in highway 405 where it joins highway 5, just north of the Glendale exit, and stretches out into canyon country. He smiled, and nodded with satisfaction. The congestion of the city of Los Angeles would fall behind him any moment now as the landscape on either side of the highway turned to country. He had chosen this route because it gave him

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the advantage of open road for the last ten miles. There was never any traffic up here, and if it turned out that he needed to push it on the last leg of this transport, this was the place in Los Angeles to do it. But he was right on schedule, and they were still looking for the wrong cars. Nothing to worry about.

But then Max did a double take in the rearview mirror. God damn it. Several miles behind him, one of their rigged-up SUVs was racing in the left lane, heading straight for him.

Shep studied the grid-lined screen, then hit the microphone switch, punched 22 into the LED readout, and spoke with quiet authority. "Car Twenty-two, come in."

"Car Twenty-two, Captain."

"Looks like you should be on him. Report," Shep said.

"Not quite on him yet. He's weaving. Stand by."

"He's made you?" Shep snapped.

"Yeah, definitely."

"Okay, let's do it. Shotgun rider, get in position," Shep ordered.

"Roger, Car Twenty-two out."

Shep punched buttons. "All units, the target has spotted Car Twenty-two. Bird One, go back down into your spotting position, give us plenty of light. Guys riding shotgun, get in position. This is it, gentlemen," he said evenly.

"Car Seventeen, roger and out."

"Yeah, Car Nineteen, got ya, Captain. Out."

"Bird One, copy that Captain, over and out."

Shep smiled slowly as he watched the icons on the computer screen converge on the position spotted by Bird 1. "Gotcha, Max."

Max felt them surrounding the car before he saw them.

Most of the big-timers say that happens to you eventually, you develop a sort of sixth sense about them and feel them closing in before you ever see them. He wasn't a big-timer exactly, but he had started developing that sixth sense about ten minutes after he got married four years ago. His bride said it was sweet, this new instinct of his to be protective of her, but it worried him that it was necessary. Keeping her safe was a reflex for him. Like breathing.

She whimpered softly from the backseat, and he swallowed hard. Only two miles to go, he just had to stay ahead of them for two miles. He eased the accelerator gently until the speedometer hit 85, well over the speed limit. Suddenly the powerful headlights of the helicopter broke through the windshield, and Max squinted sharply. It was back. Damn. He checked the mirror and saw there were two of their SUVs now. They were flanking him, left and right. Probably had a third one behind him, as well. But they were still behind him by ten car-lengths, because there was a cluster of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

semis and tractor-trailers between them. God bless the truckers, Max thought, as he rounded the wide curve just before his exit.

But then his heart froze.

Holy hell. Max stood on his brakes as a sea of red taillights ahead seemed to come racing towards him. His tires squealed and he turned the wheel sharply as he stopped, just missing the rear bumper of another white rental sedan ahead of him. He turned quickly to look in the backseat, and she looked up wide-eyed with worried surprise. His heart started to pound in his chest as he winked at her, then he turned back to peer out the windshield. What the hell was going on? Then he saw the aura of revolving red lights a few miles up ahead. An accident. Here. Now.

Max closed his eyes and cursed violently to himself, but then opened his eyes and surveyed the scene, his mind racing and his heart pumping.

It's not over yet, Max thought. There's one possibility. He had one shot.

The field units reporting the accident and resulting traffic tie-up on the 405 to the control van hooted and hollered with tremendous excitement. Larson turned to squint slowly at Shep as Shep grinned and replied to all units. "Yeah, okay, you bums, luck is our lady tonight, but we'll celebrate later, right now get your gear and go DO it," Shep shouted.

"Car Nineteen here. Shotguns only, Captain?"

"Hell no, everybody's in. Move!" Shep laughed.

There were more raucous shouts of enthusiasm from the field cars as Shep pushed another mike button.

"Bird One, the ground team is going in. Once you see them on the target, you can disengage," Shep said.

"Roger, Bird One out."

"I don't get it, Captain," Larson said, still squinting at Shep's grinning profile. "Why is this good news? We're stuck in this deadlock right along with the target."

Shep nodded. "Right. Now add it up, kid." Larson squinted blankly for a minute, and Shep laughed. "You're not just a rookie, kid, you're a kid."

Max glanced in the rearview mirror and saw them jumping out of their SUVs with their gear, grinning and laughing, then turned to look in the backseat. "Hang in there, sweetheart, it won't be long, okay?" She smiled at him bravely, but the fear in her eyes twisted a knife in his heart. He turned back to peer out the windshield intently, glancing between the hovering helicopter and the revolving red lights up ahead. Finally he saw it, a police car riding slow on the shoulder, two cops inside peering out the side window

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

towards the rows of stopped cars. "This is it, I'm going," he said calmly, then jumped out of the car, locked it behind him, and started running towards the cop car.

His heart was pumping so hard he couldn't get any air, but he ran marathon-style anyway. The cops saw him and stopped, and Max ran up to the driver's side.

Max gasped for breath as the cop driving stuck his head out of the window with a stern squint. Before the cop could speak, Max barked out, "Help me, my wife is Rosalind May, the actress. We're on our way to the hospital, she's in labor, and the paparazzi goons are on us!"

The cop who was driving blinked and replied slowly, "You're Max Woodman, the film director?"

"Yes, yes, and my wife is going to have our baby in the car, in front of those animals' cameras, if you don't help us!" Max gulped for air, then pointed above. "That's their helicopter, spotting our car. They have all the high-tech stuff you guys use, they've been tracking us for twenty miles, but now that traffic has stopped . . ."

"Get in," the cop behind the wheel said crisply. Max jumped into the backseat of the car and pointed out the ordinary white sedan where his precious bride, Rosalind, cowered under a blanket in the backseat, while six men, surrounding the car and kneeling on the hood, pointed cameras at her through the windshield, side windows, and back window.

The cops squealed their siren, came even with the sedan, then jumped out and pulled their guns on the men and ordered them to get away from the car. Max ignored the guns and leapt at the men, pulling them off the car one by one, while the second cop reached into the backseat of the police car for a portable siren and flasher.

"Max!" shouted one of the cops. "Get in the backseat of your car, with your wife!" Max shoved one more cameraman, then dove into the backseat as the cops piled in the front seat. In less than a minute, they were tearing up the shoulder of the highway, siren screaming and flasher flashing, and the paparazzi goons were chasing after them on foot, cameras ablaze.

"DAMN it, we were THIS close," Shep shouted, kicking a storage bin with feeling. "If the cops hadn't taken the time to check out what Bird One was spotting, we would have HAD them," he growled.

Larson sighed. "So if we had got shots of her actually having the baby, that would have been the ultimate?"

Shep grunted. "We're talking six figures easy—she's the number one female box-office star at the moment. Here, Europe, Japan, DAMN it."

"There wouldn't have been any problem, like, you know, selling stuff like that?" Larson asked.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"No. None. Are you too young to remember Fergie getting her toes sucked on page one across the globe? Diana topless? Hell, Diana getting killed? There wouldn't have been a problem, except for managing the bidding war. DAMN it," Shep said, kicking the storage bin one more time for good measure. But then he looked at Larson curiously. "You have a problem with that, kid?"

Larson shrugged. "No way, Captain. Six figures? Way cool."

Shep laughed, and Larson grinned shyly. "Do you miss it, Captain? Being in the field yourself?"

Shep shrugged. "Sometimes. I miss the adrenaline rush sometimes, sure. But this was just too good an opportunity, putting this syndicate together. It's going to be huge. Six top field guys working together, the van and Bird One, all the new gear, and then all my contacts. These days anything goes, which means major bucks, kid."

"It will, just not this time," Larson sighed.

Shep smiled. "We'll do okay this time."

"We will?"

"We didn't get what we wanted originally, shots of her waddling into the hospital with her faithful ape Max at her side, and we didn't get the six-figure stuff of her having the kid in the car, no. But we did get her in the car, cowering from us, and Max coming at us with his face twisted with rage—plus the cops commandeering Max's white sedan and peeling off up the shoulder of the highway past the accident scene. We got good stuff. I can sell it. That's why they call me Captain Cash." ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art by Allen Davis

ANNA AND THE PLAYERS

by Ed Gorman

At least they didn't have her running out and getting lunch for them anymore, Anna thought. That in itself was a sort of promotion.

She yawned.

As the lone female on the ten-man Cedar Rapids Police Department in the year of Our Lord 1883, police matron Anna Tolan had spent the previous night studying the work of a French criminal scientist named Marie Francois Goron. The field was called criminology, and both Scotland Yard and its French counterpart were expanding it every day. Using various methods she'd learned from Goron's writings, Anna had solved three murders in the fourteen months of her employment here. Not that anybody knew this, of course. Two detectives named Riley and Czmeck had been quick to claim credit on all three cases.

Anna yawned again. Her sweet landlady, Mrs. Goldman, had come to her door late last night and begged Anna to turn off the kerosene lamp and get some sleep. "You push yourself way too hard with this police thing, Anna."

©2000 by Ed Gorman

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Readers who know Ed Gorman's darker tales will perhaps be surprised by "Anna and the Players," a Victorian whodunit complete with red herrings, a full cast of suspects, and classical detection. Police detective Anna Tolan, depicted as the sole woman detective on the Cedar Rapids police force in 1883, is based on a real Iowa policewoman of the time. The author pens another series set in the 1950s; its latest entry is *Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?* (Carroll & Graf/ January '01). †

Yes, and for what reason? Anna thought. It was doubtful she'd ever be promoted to full police officer. There were people in town who thought it was sinful for her to be on the police force at all. A woman. Just imagine. Tsk tsk. They even stood before the mayor in city-council meetings and quoted scripture to her that "proved" that God didn't want women police officers. Apparently, God had opinions on everything.

Thunder rumbled down the sky. The chill, rainy October morning was at least partly responsible for Anna's mood. Rain affected her immediately and deeply, made her feel vulnerable, melancholy. Even as a child back on the farm near Parnell, Anna had been this way. Rain always brought demons.

"There's a lady up front who won't talk to me," a male voice said. "Said she wanted to talk to the one and only Anna Tolan."

The half-bellow, the smell of cheap cigars, and the doglike odor of rain on a wool suit meant that Detective Riley was leaning in the door of Anna's office in the back of the station house.

"Something about ghosts," Riley said.

Anna turned in her chair and looked at him. Fifty pounds ago he'd been a good-looking man. But early middle-age hadn't been kind to him. He looked puffy and tired. Ten years ago, he'd pitched a no-hit game against Des Moines and had been town hero for several years following. Now, he looked like the bloated uncle of that young man, only the faintest resemblance showing.

"Ghosts?"

"That's what she said."

"Nice of you to give it to me."

Half the cops were nice to her and helped her in every way possible. They recognized her for the competent law officer she was. This, thank God, included the chief. The other half gave her all the cases they didn't want. But she was glad to get even the bad ones because otherwise her day would consist of checking the jail three times a day, walking around town in her light blue pinafore and starched white blouse, and asking merchants if everything was going well with them—no break-ins, no robberies, nobody hassling them. One of the reasons that Cedar Rapids had grown so

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

quickly was that it knew how to attract and keep businesses. Twenty-five thousand citizens. More than four hundred telephones. Electricity. In two or three years, there'd even be steam trolleys to replace the present horse-drawn ones. There was even an opera house that featured some of the world's most notable theatrical attractions. Chief Ryan once said, "It sure doesn't hurt to have a pretty little slip of an Irish girl—and with beautiful red hair yet—talking to the merchants to see that the town keeps them happy. It sure doesn't, Anna."

"I thought you wanted any cases we gave you," Riley said. "If you want me to, I'll give it to somebody else."

"I'm sorry. I'm just in kind of a crabby mood today."

"Trace Wydmore bothering you to marry him again?"

"I wish you'd leave him alone. He's a decent man."

"If he's so decent, why don't you marry him?"

"That really isn't any of your business."

"Tell him to give me some of his money. He's got plenty to go around, that's for sure."

Trace Wydmore was intelligent, handsome, pleasant, fun, and kind. He was also very, very rich. About every three months, even though they'd long ago quit seeing each other, Trace would suddenly reappear and ask her to marry him. She felt sorry for him. But she didn't love him. She liked him, admired him, appreciated him. But she didn't love him.

She changed the subject. "You're right, Riley, I *do* want the case. Thank you for giving it to me. I guess I'm just in a bad mood. The rain."

"You and my old lady," he said. "There's always some reason she's crabby." Then he waggled his fingers at her, wraithlike, and made a spooky noise. "I'll go get the ghost lady."

Her name was Virginia Olson, a bulky, middle-aged woman with a doughy face and hard, bright, not terribly friendly blue eyes. She cleaned rooms at the Astor hotel, a somewhat seedy place along the river. She wore a pinafore, not unlike Anna's in cut and style, but stained and smudged with the indelicacies of hotel guests. When she talked, silver spittle frothed up in the corners of her mouth and ran down the sides of her lips. She said, "Oh, I seen her all right."

"Anthea Murchison?"

"Anthea Murchison. Right in front of my eyes."

"She's been dead over a year now. Her buggy overturned over in Johnson county and she went off a cliff."

"I don't need no rehash, miss," she said. "I read the papers. I keep up."

"Then if you keep up," Anna said, staying calm and patient, "and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

if you think it through, what you're saying is impossible."

"That a dead woman was in the hotel last night? Well, she was."

Anna sighed. "Exactly what would you like me to do?"

"You're just as snooty as the men officers. You try'n give the coppers a tip and look what you get."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Olson."

"Miss Olson."

"Miss Olson, then."

"Not that I never had no chances to be *Mrs.* Olson." She sucked up some of the frothing spittle.

"I'm sure you had plenty of chances."

"I wasn't always fat. It's this condition I have. And my hair used to be black as night, too. But then I got this here condition."

"I'm sorry. Now, if you'll just tell me—"

"She wore this big picture hat. You know what a picture hat is?"

"Yes." They were the fashion these days, hats with huge brims that covered half a lady's face.

"She also had some kind of wig on when she came in the hotel. That's why I didn't recognize her. Her disguise. But I was goin' to my own room—the hotel gives me room and board except the food is pig swill—anyway, later on I'm goin' to my room and I seen her door was partly open and I just happened to glance inside and there she was without her hat and her wig and I seen her. Anthea Murchison. Plain as day."

"Did she see you?"

"I think she must've because she hurried quick-like to the door and practically slammed it." She paused to suck up some more spittle. Anna wondered if the spittle had anything to do with the woman's "condition."

"You'd seen the Murchison woman before?"

Miss Olson smirked. "You mean when she was alive?"

"Yes."

"Oh, I seen her all right. Plenty of times."

"Where?"

"The hotel. That's why I recognized her so fast. Her and her gentleman friend used to come up the back way."

"When was this?"

Virginia Olson thought about it for a time. "Oh, six, seven months before she died."

"How often did they come there?"

"Once a week, say."

"They didn't check in at the front desk?"

"No. They had—or she had, anyway—some kind of deal worked out with Mr. Sullivan. The manager. Poor man."

"Poor man?"

"The cancer. He weighed about eighty pounds when they

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

planted him. Liver. He was all yellow."

"That's too bad."

"No, it isn't."

"It isn't?"

"I mean, I didn't want to see him die that way—I wouldn't want to see *any*body die that way—but he was a mean, cheap bastard who never did a lick'a work in his life."

"I'm sorry to hear that. But let's get back to Anthea Murchison."

"They were havin' it on."

"I gathered that. Did you know who he was?"

"I almost got a look at him once. But he always moved real fast. And he wore this big fake black beard and this big hat that covered a lot of his face."

"Like her picture hat?"

"I never thought of that. But you're right. It was sorta like a picture hat except it was for a man. Like somethin' you'd see on the stage, I guess. That a villain would wear or somethin'."

She took a railroad watch from the pocket of her pinafore and said, "I got to get back. I'm just here on my break."

"I still don't know what you want me to do, Mrs. Olson."

"Come over there and look at her. See if it ain't Mrs. Murchison in the flesh."

The woman wasn't going to be Mrs. Murchison, of course. But it'd be better than just sitting here on this gloomy morning. And on the way back, she could swing past the jail and make one of her morning inspections. Make sure things were being run properly. Chief Ryan prided himself on his jail. He wanted it clean, orderly, and without a whisper of scandal. He hoped to run for mayor someday, Chief Ryan did, and he didn't want some civic group pointing out that his jail had been a hell-hole, like something you'd see in Mexico. Their jails were much in the news lately. A lot of men died mysteriously in those jails.

"I'll walk back with you," Anna said, standing up.

"I got to hurry," Mrs. Olson said. "Mr. Sanford's worse than Mr. Sullivan ever was. Now Mr. Sanford, I sure wouldn't mind seein' him get the cancer. I surely wouldn't."

Hotel rooms always saddened Anna. She'd seen too many suicides, murders, and bad, illicit love affairs within their walls. One problem with being a copper was that you generally saw the worst side of people, even in a nice little town like Cedar Rapids. The grubby hallway of the Astor's third floor told her that the room she was about to see would be grubby, too. The Olson woman had gone back to work.

The hallway offered eruptions of sounds on both sides—tobacco coughs, singing-while-shaving, snoring and gargling, presumably

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

with "oral disinfectant" as the advertisements called it.

Room 334. Anna put her ear to it. Listened. Silence. Just then a door down the hall opened and a bald man in trousers, the tops of long johns, and suspenders peeked out and picked up his morning paper. He gave Anna a very close appraisal and said, "Morning."

Anna smiled, wanting to remain silent, and nodded good morning back.

She put her ear to the door again. If the woman inside was moving around, she was doing so very, very quietly. Maybe the woman had gone out the back way. While the desk clerk had assured Anna that the woman had not come down yet this morning, he obviously didn't know for sure that she was in her room.

Anna knocked gently. Counted to ten. No response. Knocked again. And still no response.

Sounds of doors opening and closing on all three floors of the hotel. Morning greetings exchanged. Smells of cigarettes, pipes, cigars. Men with leather sample bags of merchandise carted out here from points as distant as New York and Cincinnati and Chicago suddenly striding past her in the hall. A quarter to eight and the business day just beginning.

Anna knocked again.

One of the officers friendly to her had given her a couple of tools resembling walnut picks. Showed her how to use them on virtually any kind of door. He'd also given her several skeleton keys. She could get into virtually any room or house.

The room was about what she'd expected. Double bed. Bureau. Faded full-length mirror hanging on a narrow closet door. Window overlooking the alley on the east side of the hotel. What wasn't expected was the woman in bed. She lay in a faded yellow robe, with her arms spread wide. She was otherwise naked. Somebody had cut her throat. There was a necklacelike crust of dried blood directly across the center of her neck.

The woman was Anthea Murchison.

Anna's first instinct was to hurry downstairs and send somebody to summon the chief. But then she forced herself to calm down. She wouldn't get much of a chance to scientifically appraise the room—the way her idol Goron would want her to—with other cops in the room.

She spent the next twenty minutes going over everything. In the purse, she found various documents bearing the name Thea Manners, obviously the name the Murchison woman had used during the past year. But where had she been? What had she been doing? Anna inspected the bed carefully, looking for anything that might later prove useful. She found red fibers, hair strands that looked to belong to Anthea Murchison, a piece of a woman's fingernail. She checked Anthea's fingers. A slice of her right index fingernail

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

had broken off. The piece Anna held fit the maimed nail perfectly. A couple of times, Anna noticed the small, odd indentation in the wooden headboard. She took a piece of paper and held it tight to the headboard. Then she scribbled lead over the indentation. It showed a symbol: H. The style was rococo, and a bit too fancy for Anna's tastes. She put the paper in her pocket. Then she started in on the floor. Down on her hands and knees. Looking for curious footprints, or something tiny that might have been dropped. She found a number of things worth dropping in the white evidence envelope she'd made up for herself. A plain black button interested Anna especially. She checked it against Anthea's clothes in the closet. There was no match. The button belonged to somebody else. The way fashions were getting so radical these days—an Edwardian craze was sweeping the country—it was impossible to know if the button had come off male or female attire.

Fifteen minutes later, the room was filled with police officers. Anna was pretty much pushed aside. She went downstairs to the porch and stood there looking out at the street. The rain had let up but the overcast, chill autumn day remained. Wagons and buggies and surreys and a stray stagecoach or two plied the muddy streets. Somewhere nearby, the horse-drawn trolley rang its bell. Then she realized that the trolley could take her very close to where she needed to go.

She hurried to the corner. The trolley stopped for her. On a day like this one, the conveyance was crowded, bowlers on men, bustles on women bobbed as the trolley bounced down the bumpy streets. Horse-drawn taxi cabs were busy, too. The rain had started in again.

Ten years ago, the large red barn had housed two businesses, a blacksmith and a farm-implement dealer. It now housed The Players, a local theatrical group that did everything it could to create controversy, and thus sell tickets. Kevin Murchison was a dentist by day, but at night he oversaw production of the plays. His partner was David Bailey, a medical doctor. The men had much in common. They were in their early thirties, literary, handsome, and were widely held to have slept with half the women, married or not, who took roles in the various plays. Kevin was tall and pale and blond; David was short and dark and not without an air of not only malice but violence. His bedside manner was rarely praised. In fact, it was well known that most of the other doctors in town regretted ever letting him practice here. One practiced in Cedar Rapids only at the sufferance of the docs already in place. Many were called; few were chosen. David Bailey was generally regarded as a terrible choice.

The playhouse was empty when Anna arrived. She stood at the back of the place, listening to the rain play chill ancient rhythms

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

on the roof of the barn. The stage was set up for a French bedroom farce advertised outside as "DEFINITELY NAUGHTY!"—*THE NEW YORK TIMES*. Who could resist that? Word was this was the most successful play of the past three years, so successful, in fact, that both dentist and doctor were thinking of quitting their respective practices and joining The Players full-time.

"It's lovely, isn't it?" The voice definitely male, but practiced, and just this side of being "cultured."

She turned to find three people standing there: Dr. Murchison, Dr. Bailey, and Bailey's gently beautiful wife, Beatrice.

Anna said, "You've done a nice job."

Murchison said, "The finest theater outside Chicago."

Beatrice actually blushed at the hyperbole. "Or so we like to think, anyway."

There was no clue on their faces or in their voices that they'd heard about their friend Anthea. She was probably at the undertaker's by now.

Murchison, whose Edwardian suit complemented his clipped good looks and slightly European curly blond hair, said, "I'm sure you're here about Anthea."

So they did know.

"It's terrible," Beatrice said.

"I hope there'll be an investigation," Bailey said. His stocky form looked comfortable in Levi's and work shirt. The odd thing was, Murchison, who looked almost effete, had been raised on a farm. Bailey, who'd come from Boston money, could have blended in with a crew of railroad workers. "I was the one who pronounced her dead. I've got my reputation to think of." Then he made an awkward attempt to touch his hand to Murchison's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Kevin. You're grieving and all I can talk about is my reputation."

There was something rehearsed about the little scene she'd just witnessed. Or was there? Theater people—or so she'd read in one of Mrs. Goldman's Eastern magazines—sometimes carried their acting over into real-life. "Ham" was the word Anna wanted.

"Did any of you see her last night?"

"No," said Murchison. "I wish I would have. My God, I had so many questions for her." Tears filled his eyes and Beatrice, tall, regal Beatrice, took him in her arms and held him.

"Why don't we step into the office?" Bailey said. "We can talk there."

Theater posters lined the walls of the small office with the roll-top desk and the long table covered with leaflets for the present production. "Uncle Tom's Cabin," "The Widow's Revenge," "A Cupid for Constance" were listed as forthcoming. The Players were an eclectic bunch. They mixed tame fare with the occasional bedroom farce and seemed to be doing quite nicely these days.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"She was dead when we put her in the ground," Bailey said. "I'd swear to that."

"You'll have to, Doctor. There'll be a lot of questions about the autopsy report you signed."

A tic troubled his right eyelid suddenly. She said, "You didn't see her last night?"

"I believe I already answered that question."

"I'd appreciate you answering it again."

"Neither of us saw her last night," Beatrice said as she came into the office. "Poor Kevin's lying down in his private office." She went over and took a straightback chair next to her husband's. "We worked at the theater until nearly midnight and then went home and went to bed."

"I see."

Beatrice smiled. "I was just wondering if you're even authorized to ask us questions. I remember you had some trouble with the city council and all."

"The chief will back me up, if that's what you mean." Then, "I'm going to ask for the grave to be disinterred this afternoon."

"And why would you do that?" Bailey said.

"I want to see what's in the coffin."

"Well, obviously *Anthea* won't be," Bailey said. His eye tic was suddenly worse.

"How did Anthea and Kevin get along?"

"Just wonderfully," Beatrice said.

"There were a lot of rumors."

Beatrice smiled. "Of course there were rumors, dear. This is a rumor kind of town. Anybody who shows a little flair for anything even the slightest bit different from the herd—well, rumors are the price you pay."

"Then they were happy?"

"Very."

"And there was no talk of divorce?"

"Of course not."

They weren't going to cooperate and Anna knew it. They had pat little answers to turn aside all her questions. And that was all she was going to get.

She stood up. "Where's Dr. Murchison's office?"

"Just down the hall," Beatrice said. "But he really does want to be alone. He's very confused and hurt right now."

"I'll keep that in mind," Anna said. "And thank you for your time."

As she was turning to the door, Bailey said, "You've been incredibly insensitive. I may just talk to the chief about it."

"That's up to you, Dr. Bailey."

They stared at each other for a long moment, and then Anna went down the hall.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Just as she reached Murchison's door, she heard a female voice behind it say, "Oh, Kevin, why lie about it? You sleep with all the ingénues and then get tired of them. That's what's happening to us. You're tired of me but you don't want to hurt my feelings by telling me."

"I just need some time to—think, Karen. That's all. Especially after this morning. My wife and everything."

"You should be grateful to her," Karen said. "She gave you a perfect excuse for not seeing me tonight." By the end, her voice had started to tremble with tears. "Oh, I was stupid to think you were really in love with me."

Anna had always been told that in amateur theater groups, the real drama went on offstage. Apparently so. She hated to embarrass Karen by knocking now but she had work to do. She knocked.

Murchison opened the door quickly, obviously grateful for any interruption. But he frowned when he saw Anna. "Oh, great, just what I need. More questions."

"I just need a few minutes, Dr. Murchison."

The word "ingénue" had misled Anna into picturing a slender, somewhat ethereal young woman. While Karen was still an exquisite-looking woman, her years were starting to do damage, the face a bit fleshy, the neck a bit loose, the high bustline a bit matronly now. She was a fading beauty, and there was always something sad about that. There was a wedding ring on Karen's left finger. But it was the other thing she kept touching—her fingers fluttered at her throat, at a large piece of expensive jewelry.

"I'll talk to you tonight," Murchison said, "if Miss Tolan here doesn't put me in jail for some reason." He didn't even try to disguise the bitterness in his voice.

Karen whimpered, pushed past Anna, and exited the room.

"I suppose you heard it all while you were standing by the door," Murchison said, "and will run right down to her husband's office and tell him."

Anna suspected that this was the real Murchison. The mild man she'd met earlier had been a mask.

"I don't even know who her husband is," Anna said.

"Lawrence Remington," Murchison said. "He has a very successful law practice in the Ely building. On the second floor, in case you're interested." He smirked. "I only commit adultery with the upper classes. I guess I'm something of a snob." He took out a packet of Egyptian cigarettes. Nobody was more pretentious than certain amateur theater types. "She's not as beautiful as she used to be. But Remington doesn't seem to notice that. He's insanely jealous."

"Maybe he loves her."

But love didn't interest him much. He merely shrugged.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'm told that you and your wife were on the verge of divorce at the time of her supposed death."

He glared at her. "You don't waste any time, do you? Have you ever thought that I might be grieving? Here I thought my wife was dead—and then she suddenly turns up. And now she's dead again." She could see why he produced the shows instead of starred in them. He was a terrible actor.

"Did you see her last night?"

"I've already told you no."

"What if I said somebody saw her slipping into your house?"

He didn't hesitate. "Then I'd say you're lying."

Sometimes the trick Chief Ryan had taught her worked. Sometimes it didn't. She tried a trick of her own. "I found a cuff button in your wife's hotel room."

"Good for you."

"I'm sure you'd be happy to let me look through your shirts."

He met her eye. He seemed to be enjoying this, which did not do much for her police-officer ego. "Would you like to go to my place and look through my shirts?"

Once again, she changed the subject, now uncertain of herself and the direction of her questions. "The night clerk said he saw a man going up to her room late last night." One last attempt to trap him.

"Oh? Maybe you'd like me to stop by so he can see me." He laughed. "I'll cooperate with you any way you want, Miss Tolan. I have nothing to hide."

Maybe he didn't, after all. Or maybe he was clever enough to offer himself up this way, knowing she wouldn't call him on it. She felt slow-witted and dull. She was sure she'd been the brunt of many jokes told after hours at the Players' notorious wine parties. She was just glad Chief Ryan wasn't here to see this sorry interrogation. She wanted to be home suddenly, in Mrs. Goldman's parlor, listening to Mrs. Goldman's stirring stories about the Civil War, and how the ladies of Iowa had worked eighteen-hour days making bullets and knitting sweaters and stockings and mittens for their Union husbands and sons and brothers. Mrs. Goldman said that they'd even loaded up the steamboats when no men could be found.

She angled herself toward the door. "I guess I'll be going now."

"I was just starting to have fun." Then, "You're very pretty, Anna. Have you ever thought of trying out for one of our plays?"

She knew she was blushing. His compliment had cinched his victory. He'd reduced her status from detective to simple young woman.

"I'll talk to you later," she said, and hurried out of his room. He laughed once behind her—an empty, fake laugh that was yet another example of his bad acting.

Anna was about to walk out through the front door when she

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

heard the weeping in the deep shadows to the side. She squinted into the gloom and saw nothing. But the weeping sound remained constant. Anna made her way carefully toward the far wall. A shape began to form. Karen Remington. She paused long enough to say, "Do you have a cigarette?"

Good girls don't smoke, Anna wanted to say. Or so her farmer parents had always told her, anyway. And Anna couldn't get away from their influence, much as she wanted to sometimes. Any woman she saw smoking a cigarette, she automatically downgraded socially if not morally. "I'm afraid I don't smoke."

"I must look terrible. My makeup."

Anna smiled. "Actually, I can't see you very well."

The Remington woman laughed. And that made Anna like her. "If that's the case, I should probably stay here the rest of my life. In the shadows. Then I won't have to see how old I'm getting." She paused, snuffled tears, daubed a lace handkerchief to nose and lips. "I've always read about women like myself—that's why I can't stand to read Henry James; I see myself in so many of his silly, middle-aged women. Vain and desperate." More snuffling. "I told myself that the Players would be good for me. My son was off to Princeton, my husband was always busy. I felt—Oh, it's all such a cliché. You know how I felt. So I decided to help out with publicity. Then I helped with costumes. Then I tried out for a part in a play. And then I got involved with dear Kevin. You know the funny thing? He not only seduced me—though of course I *wanted* to be seduced—he convinced me to give him money. And large amounts of it. My husband was furious when he found out. Even threatened to divorce me. I actually think he resented the money even more than he resented my being unfaithful. He's not a generous man. But I didn't care. Kevin and I were going to run off and start another theater someplace. I wanted to go east, to be nearer my son. Kevin led me to believe—"

"Nasty Kevin," a male voice said on the other side of the gloom. "Nasty, nasty Kevin."

It was Kevin, of course.

"I didn't 'lead her to believe' anything, Miss Tolan. She believed what she *wanted* to believe."

"Unfortunately," the Remington woman said, "that's true."

And promptly began sobbing again, even more violently than before.

Soon enough, Anna was on the trolley again, headed downtown once more. The sun was out now; the temperature was up in the forties. Anna looked longingly at the stately buildings of Coe College, Main Building and Williston Hall, as they were known. She hoped to take classes there someday. She'd seen photographs of college girls in crisp spring dresses. How intelligent and poised

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and professional they looked. Her secret dream was to be one of them. Anna Tolan, college girl.

Anna had no trouble with Chief Ryan. He understood exactly why she wanted the Murchison woman's coffin dug up. Judge Rollins, who could sometimes be a problem, also understood and approved her request.

At four that afternoon, Anna, Chief Ryan, and two scruffy gravediggers stood over Anthea Murchison's gravesite. The air was fresh, cleansed by the recent rain, and the gravestones glistened as if they'd been scrubbed. Some of them dated as far back as the late 1700s, when some Frenchmen down from Green Bay, Wisconsin had started trading iron kettles, cloth, and knives for some of the Iowa Indians' animal skins. An influenza outbreak had killed at least a dozen of the French traders.

"If there's a body in there, Anna," Chief Ryan said, "I want you to look away. Otherwise, it'll stay in your mind the rest of your life."

Chief Ryan was every bit as grandfatherly as he sounded: a big, broad, gray-haired man with the red nose of a drinker and the kind eyes of a village priest. His grandparents had come from County Cork two generations ago. Every Ryan male since had been a law officer of some kind.

"I'll be fine, Chief."

"You're not as tough as you think, young lady."

Remembering her wretched questioning of the glib Kevin Murchison, she had to silently agree.

The exhumation went quickly. The gravediggers knew their business. When they reached the wooden coffin with the cross in the center of the lid, the taller of the two jumped down into the grave with his crowbar. He was able to balance himself against the walls of the grave and open the coffin lid.

He pried the lid open and flung it back. "Empty, sir," he shouted up to the chief.

"Empty," the chief repeated. "Empty."

When they got back to the station, Anna found a man waiting for her. She saw him around town frequently but didn't know who he was or what he did.

He doffed his derby and said, "My name is Peterson. Pete Peterson. I sell insurance."

"This is a bad time to sell me anything, Mr. Peterson."

He smiled. He had a boyish face emphasized by the youthful cut of his checkered suit. Salesmen, or "drummers" as they were popularly called, had come to favor checks. They felt that the pattern put people in a happier frame of mind than, say, dark blue or black. "I'm here about Anthea Murchison."

"Oh?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"My company issued her a life-insurance policy for fifty thousand dollars eight months before she died."

"Oh," Anna said, catching his implication instantly.

They sat in her office for the next hour. The day shift was winding down. Men called goodbyes to each other. The handful of night-shifters came on, their leather gunbelts creaking, their heavy shoes loud on the wooden floors.

"Insurance fraud is what we're looking at," Peterson said. "If we can prove it."

"Why couldn't you prove it?" Anna said. "The coffin was empty. And Dr. Bailey signed the death certificate. He had to know she wasn't dead."

"I think it was for that theater of theirs."

"The money, you mean?"

Peterson nodded. "The way I understand it, they couldn't get any more investors. They'd borrowed everything they could. The theater was going under."

"So they staged Anthea Murchison's death."

"And collected fifty thousand dollars."

"Your company didn't investigate?"

"Of course, we investigated. But as you said, we had a signed death certificate. There was no reason to go into an all-out investigation. We didn't spend all that much time on it. Now, it's obvious we were defrauded."

"They'll probably try to leave town."

"If they haven't already."

"I'm not sure how long I can hold them on what we have now, though."

"But we *know* what happened, Anna."

"Yes, we know it. But can we prove it? Defense attorneys are very creative people, Pete."

"Don't I know it. They've helped cheat my company out of millions of dollars." Whenever he spoke of the company, his tone became downright reverent. Like a cardinal invoking the name of the Vatican.

"I need to talk to the chief about all this, Pete. There's also a murder investigation going on. He'll want to move carefully."

"What's he afraid of?"

"What he's afraid of, Mr. Peterson," Chief Ryan said, walking into Anna's office, "is that you'll get your fraud case all resolved, and we still won't know why Anthea Murchison came back to town last night—and why one of them killed her."

Peterson frowned. "So you're not going to arrest them?"

"Not right now," Ryan said, "and I don't want you approaching them, either. You understand?"

"My company isn't going to be happy."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'm sorry about that, Mr. Peterson," Ryan said. "But that's the way it has to be for a little while longer."

Mr. Peterson's checkered suit seemed to fade slightly in intensity. Even the magnificently bogus gleam in his eyes had dulled. His company wasn't happy, and neither was he.

"Now, if you don't mind, Mr. Peterson, Anna and I need to get back to work."

Mr. Peterson dragged himself to his feet. He looked weary, old. He took his faded suit and faded eyes to the door and said, "I'll have to go and send my company a telegram, I guess." And with that, he was gone.

A moment later, Chief Ryan said, "The mayor wants me to put Riley on the case."

"I figured that would happen."

"You know this isn't my decision. But there's an election coming up and he doesn't want to have an unsolved case like this hanging over his head." Ryan smiled. "But nobody can stop you from working on the case on your own, Anna."

Their usual bargain had been struck. Anna worked on the case and secretly reported back to the chief.

Anna smiled. "I guess I do have a little time on my hands tonight."

"Glad to hear it."

After dinner with Mrs. Goldman, Anna took the evidence up to her room and started sifting through it. Goron had instructed would-be detectives to store all evidence in the same box, and to tag it alphabetically. Fingerprints were beginning to play a role in law enforcement. Even though law enforcement in the United States was still sceptical of such evidence—and no court would allow it to be used—Goron insisted that all pieces of evidence remain as pristine as possible. Goron insisted that fingerprints were also the surest way to identify a killer. Find a print on a murder weapon and you had your man.

Anna worked till after midnight. On her bed was the button she'd found on Anthea Murchison's hotel bed, the sketch she'd made of some strange footprints on the hotel-room floor, a cigarette made of coarse tan paper and heavy tobacco leaves, a man's comb with gray hair in it, a drinking glass across which were smeared two or three different sets of fingerprints, and then the curious H marking she'd found on the headboard of Anthea's hotel bed. The trouble with all her evidence was that she couldn't date it. It might have been in the room for a month. Even the cigarette butt didn't tell her anything decisive. A sloppy cleaning woman might have left it behind a few weeks ago.

There would be no trouble proving that the owners of the Play-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ers had perpetrated a fraud; proving that one of them had perpetrated a murder might be something else again.

Kevin Murchison had planned on only one drink at the River's Edge. He had four in less than an hour. On an empty stomach. Which was not exactly brilliant. With the law now having him under suspicion—even that stupid insurance investigator Pete Peterson should be able to figure things out now—he needed to remain sharp and clear-headed.

But somehow his fear (oh, he'd do just dandy in prison, wouldn't he?) and self-pity (why shouldn't a nice decent fellow like himself be able to get away with a little fraud now and then? Insurance companies had lots of money, didn't they?) and loathing (he hated the taverns of Cedar Rapids; all the silly yokel chatter; never a word about theater life or the latest Broadway scandal, which Kevin kept up on via the *New York Times*, however dated it was by the time it reached this little hellhole of a burg)—somehow his fear, his self-pity, and his loathing forced him to drink more.

By the time he was ready to walk home, he had to make himself conscious of his gait. Didn't want to appear drunk. Drunk meant vulnerable and oh, how that pretty little piece of a police matron or whatever the hell she was would love to get him when he was vulnerable.

The autumn dusk was chill and brief and gorgeous, the sky layered in smoky pastels of gold and salmon. His Tudor-style home was dark when he reached it. He'd let the last of his servants go shortly after Anthea's "death." He could no longer afford the pretense. Anyway, he needed the town's sympathy—the bereaved husband and all that—to allay suspicion that Anthea's death had been suspicious. People in a place like Cedar Rapids were never sympathetic to people who had servants.

He reheated this morning's coffee and then went to the north wing of the house, where the den was located. He'd just touched a match to the desk lamp when the smell filled his nostrils. He wanted to vomit.

She lay over by the fireplace, the fire poker next to her fine blond head. The tip of the poker gleamed with her blood.

He knelt next to her. Once or twice, he reached out to touch her. But then stopped himself. He didn't want to remember her flesh as cold. In life, it had been so warm and supple and erotic. He had never loved anyone as much as he'd loved Beatrice. They'd been planning to run away tonight, leaving her husband David Bailey to explain things to the police—the insurance fraud and Anthea's murder last night.

Now, he knew who had murdered Anthea. David Bailey. Anthea'd stopped by the house here late last night and demanded

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

more money, said she'd been living in New Orleans but had run out of money. They'd been planning to divorce anyway at the time they faked her death—so she took one-third of the insurance money and fled, and they put the rest of the money into the theater. He'd lied to her last night and said he'd get her more this morning. Anything to get rid of her. So, apparently, she'd next gone to visit and blackmail Bailey. And he must have killed her. As he'd killed poor Beatrice tonight. Bailey, a jealous man for all his own unfaithfulness, had likely learned about Beatrice and Kevin. And killed her for her betraying him.

He wasn't given to tears and so his sobs were fitful. He leaned in. He couldn't help himself. He kissed her cold dead lips.

And then he stood up and knew what he had to do, where he had to go. Right now, nothing else mattered. Nothing else at all.

"You could've killed Beatrice," Anna said.

"No, I couldn't," Murchison said. "I loved her too much."

"So," the chief said, "you admit to the insurance fraud."

"Yes, of course. I've told you that already. We were just trying to save the theater."

"But not to murdering your wife," Anna said.

"Or Beatrice," the chief said.

It was near midnight in the small back room of the station the police used to question suspects. The room was bare except for a few fading dirty words prisoners had scribbled on the wall from time to time.

Kevin Murchison had gone to Anna's and told her what happened. His version of it, anyway. Then she'd taken him downtown and used the telephone to call the chief and ask him to come down, too. She still got a thrill every time she used the telephone. They'd spent the last two hours going over and over Murchison's story. The atmosphere wasn't hostile, but it was certainly intense. The dancing light of a kerosene lamp threw everything into soft shadow.

"Who do you think killed them, then?" Anna said.

"I've told you that already."

"I wish you'd quit saying that," the chief said, lighting his pipe with a stick match. "We're well aware we keep asking you the same questions over and over."

"It's damned annoying, is what it is."

"So," the chief said, "who do you think killed the two women?"

Murchison glared at him. Sighed. "I've told you and told you. David killed them."

"Why would he kill them?"

"He's got a terrible temper. Anthea must've seen him last night and demanded money. The same way she did from me. He got angry and killed her."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"But why would he kill Beatrice?" Anna said.

"Because he found out about us. Not only that we were lovers but that we were running away together."

"And so he killed her?" Anna said.

"You'd have to see him lose his temper to understand how easily he could kill somebody. He's terrifying when he's like that."

A knock. The chief said, "That's probably Henning, Anna. Why don't you take it? I'll keep on questioning our friend here."

"I didn't kill either of those women," Kevin Murchison said, sounding like a sad little boy. "I really didn't."

Anna opened the door. Henning was one of the older officers, a big, bald man with bushy eyebrows and a chin scar from a long-ago altercation with a hobo. Anna stepped out into the hall. "Bailey wasn't at home."

"Did you find a train schedule?"

Henning nodded, handed her a pamphlet.

"Thanks," she said. "I need to make my rounds." She nodded. There was a train leaving for Chicago in forty-five minutes. She opened the door and peeked in and said, "I'm going over to the train depot."

"Good idea," the chief said. "You know where my Navy Colt is. Take it."

"I probably won't need it."

"Take it, anyway."

While Anna didn't much like firearms, the chief had turned her into a fair marksman. She preferred to think of herself as a Goron type of peace officer. "Brain power," Goron often said, was more important than "brute power." But she reluctantly went into the chief's office, went to his desk, opened the wide middle drawer, and took out the Navy Colt.

Cedar Rapids had a crush on its train depot, one of those crushes that made folks just about absolutely goofy. Some folks would bring their own chairs to the depot just so they could sit and watch trains arrive and depart all day long. Other folks even brought picnic lunches, just to sit and watch the panoramic show that trains put on. People loved everything about trains, the bold colors of the engine cars, the gray billowing smoke, the stink of coal, the smell of oil, the clatter of couplings. They were especially interested in the fancy dining cars and parlor cars. "The envy of sultans!" as one advertisement boasted. They liked to see exotic strangers disembark, New York people or Chicago people or Boston people, fancy people stepping down to stretch their legs before the train roared away again, women in huge capes and big important hairstyles, and men in dove-gray vests and top hats and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

spats, money and culture and a self-confidence that Cedar Rapids folks could only dream of.

Because the temperature had dipped several degrees, most of the waiting passengers were inside the depot, on the benches close to the pot-bellied stove. The fog had discouraged them, too, a damp, thick, gritty fog. There weren't many people inside, mostly drummers on to the next burg, derbys down on their faces as they snored off weariness and whiskey.

She searched all the obvious places inside. Bailey wasn't in any of them. She described him to everybody she saw. Nobody had seen him. Not even the ticket seller recalled seeing him.

She'd been there fifteen, twenty minutes when the drunk came reeling in. She'd arrested him a few times. His name was Henry. He'd used so many aliases neither he nor the police were sure of his last name. He was mostly a small-time grifter preying on elderly folks. He was a good-looking man but you couldn't tell it beneath the layers of grime and bar liquor.

He went over to the ticket window. Moments later, he was shouting at the ticket man. Anna went over.

"Where the hell is he?" Henry wanted to know.

"Where is who?" the ticket man said several times. "I don't know who you're talking about."

"That doctor."

"What doctor?" Anna said.

Henry turned awkwardly and glared at her. He looked to be near collapse, the final stages of this particular bender. He'd stay dry for a few months, working his grifts, and then do another bender again for five, six weeks. "You got no call to arrest me."

"I just want to talk to you."

"That's what you said las' time."

For a drunk, he had a good memory. She took his elbow, angled him away from the ticket window. "Who's the doctor you're looking for?"

"None of your damn business. I got rights, you know."

"You keep it up, Henry, and I *will* arrest you. Now who's the doctor?"

He needed a shave, two or three baths, and his dirty black suit needed all sorts of sewing. He glared silently at her as long as he could. Then he sighed and said, "Bailey."

"I thought so. Why're you looking for him?"

"He promised me five dollars." Five dollars would buy a lot of bad liquor.

"For what?"

"For buying his train ticket."

So that's how Bailey had worked it. He knew the police would be watching the depot. "Where'd you see him last?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Henry nodded eastward. "Out by the baggage carts."

The plan was becoming obvious. Bailey had sent Henry in to buy a ticket. That's why nobody had seen Bailey. Then he'd wait till the very last minute and jump out of the shadows and board the train. He'd hide somewhere aboard until the train was thirty, forty miles down the line.

"Where was the ticket to?"

"Chicago."

A good place to get lost in, Anna thought.

"He said he'd pay you five dollars?"

"Yeah. But he only paid me two. Said that was all the cash he had on him. I went over and started drinkin' and the more I thought of it, the madder I got. So I come back here."

"I appreciate this, Henry."

"You see him, you tell him he owes me three dollars."

"I'll tell him, Henry. Don't worry."

Things were working out for Bailey. A heavy autumnal fog was even heavier, rolling in, snaking silver across everything. You couldn't see more than a yard or so in front of you.

Anna started making her way down the platform. She'd decided to use the chief's Navy Colt, after all. She gripped it tight in her right hand.

She heard somebody walking toward her. She ducked behind an empty baggage cart, one as large as a small horse-drawn utility wagon. She raised the gun, ready to use it if necessary.

An older couple, the Mayples, appeared out of the fog. Selma Mayples had on the tiny straw hat with the merry red band she wore whenever she left the house. Stout Sam Mayples was carrying a small suitcase. Selma must be visiting her sick sister in Rock Island again.

After they passed, she resumed her search. She walked up and down the platform twice, searching in, under, and around anything that looked even vaguely like a hiding place. She had no better luck outside than she'd had inside.

She was just about to give up when she heard a horse neigh somewhere in the gloom. The cabs. This late at night, there'd be only one cab working. But a couple of the drivers always left their cabs here. The livery was close by. They'd just walk their horses over in the morning and they'd be ready to go.

She found the shapes of three empty cabs down by the wagons. In the fog, the wagon beds resembled coffins. She had her gun drawn, ready.

Night sounds. Player-piano music from a tavern somewhere. The rail-thrumming buzz of a distant train. Fog-muted conversation from inside the depot.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She walked up to the first wagon. Checked out the bed. Empty. Moved on to the second wagon. Also empty.

Was just moving to the third wagon when he suddenly lurched from the murk—the smell of whiskey, the rustle of his wool suit—and brought the handle of his six-shooter down on the side of her head. But she'd just been turning away from him and so the impact of his blow lost most of its effectiveness.

Bailey made the mistake of trying to hit her a second time. He moved too far in and this time—despite the pain he'd inflicted—she was ready for him. He found himself facing the barrel of her Colt.

"Give me your gun."

He started to hesitate. Then she put the barrel of her weapon directly against his left eye and slowly eased back the trigger.

"Your gun."

He handed her the gun.

"The chief wants to talk to you," Anna said.

"For what?"

"For killing Anthea last night, and your wife Beatrice tonight."

She couldn't see him well enough to read his expression. But when she mentioned Beatrice, an animal cry seemed to stick in his throat. "Beatrice? Beatrice is dead?"

"You don't know anything about it, of course?"

"My God. You're talking about my wife. I would never kill her."

She thought of Murchison saying essentially the same thing about his own wife's death. They were both apparently reading from the same bad play.

"I didn't kill her, Anna. I really didn't."

"We'll talk to the chief about that."

She took his shoulder, turned him around so that he faced the depot. "We'll walk to the depot then take the alley over to the station. Just remember I have a gun."

"He must have done it."

"Who?"

"Kevin. He thought she loved him. She must've changed her mind and then he killed her. He was never satisfied with just seducing them. They had to fall in love with him, too." His words were bitter yet tired, the force of them fading in the fog. "The way he got Karen Hastings to fall in love with him. He thought that was such a conquest."

"Who's Karen Hastings?"

"You met her yesterday. At the theater. In Kevin's office."

"I thought her name was Remington."

"Oh—sorry. Hastings was the name she used at the theater. It was her maiden name."

"C'mon, now. Move."

"But I didn't do anything. I really didn't."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You're part of an insurance fraud if nothing else."

She nudged him with the gun.

The tracks thrummed louder now. The train was approaching. Passengers were drifting to the platform, carrying carpetbags and suitcases and even a trunk or two. This late at night, and the fog so heavy, the festive air common to the depot was gone. The passengers just wanted to get on board and be gone. A couple of Mesquakie Indians shivered inside the colorful blankets they had wrapped around themselves.

And then Anna saw the woman they'd just been talking about, Karen Remington. She was just now hurrying out the depot door to the platform. She wore a vast picture hat that did a good job of concealing her face, as the Russian-style greatcoat concealed her figure. Anna wouldn't have recognized her but Bailey did. "Karen!"

The Remington woman swung her face away from Bailey and tried to hurry to the edge of the platform. Obviously, she didn't want to be seen. Bailey started to reach out for her but Karen Remington raised her hand to keep him away.

And when Anna saw the large, pale hand—and the ring with the H on it—she remembered the indentation on the headboard in Anthea Murchison's hotel room. A ring had put that indentation in the headboard, probably when the hand was flung against the wood as the killer was wrestling with Anthea. A ring with the letter H on it. Karen Hastings Remington was the killer Anna was looking for.

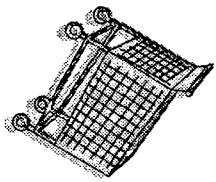
It was dawn before Karen Remington told Anna and the chief what had really happened. When Karen learned that Anthea was back in town, she was afraid that Anthea would steal Kevin back. So she killed her. Then, when Kevin spurned her for Beatrice, she decided to end his life in an especially nasty way—kill the woman he loved, and see to it that he was hanged for that murder.

Anna used the new typewriter at the station to pound out a confession for Karen Remington to sign. By this time, Karen's blustery husband was in the station making all sorts of threats to the chief and talking about what an outrage it was to even *suspect* a woman of such high reputation of murder. He even summoned a few more of his firm's lawyers to come to the station and badger the chief.

Anna reached home about noon. Mrs. Goldman fed her warm tomato soup and a cheese sandwich. Anna took the latest Nick Carter suspense story upstairs with her. She didn't get much farther than the part where Nick disguised himself as a blind Chinese wise man so he could infiltrate the Tong gangs that had been plaguing the city.

Nick would have to wait. So would everything and everybody else. She slept. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Mean Clara

by Katherine H. Brooks

Mean Clara was one of those ornery creatures
who feel that the world is a terrible place.
She harbored resentments that twisted her features,
and wore a perpetual frown on her face.
She criticized, argued, and relished a quarrel,
she toyed with the lives she intended to cheat.
She was wicked and heartless and somewhat immoral,
sarcastic, insulting and quite indiscreet.
There wasn't a male who would tangle with Clara,
for fear that he'd suffer the brunt of her lies.
And although she embellished her lids with mascara,
the men she encountered avoided her eyes.

Employed as a bagger, intent upon packing
the food in a way that the ice cream would run,
She distributed eggs so the shells would be cracking,
then scrambled the contents, and thought it was fun.
She pounded the lettuce until it was wilted—
she slammed at the crackers to turn them to grist.
She jiggled the berries, made sure the pies tilted,
and pummeled potato chip bags with her fist,
And it came to a point where the people who hired her,
along with consumers, were ready to fight,
But while they were making arrangements to fire her,
she disappeared suddenly into the night.

It took them a couple of weeks till they found her,
down under the loading dock, stashed in a cart,
With broken potato chips scattered around her,
a skewer (for 25 cents) in her heart.
A mixture of lettuce and egg yolks was sitting
on skin sticky-gooey with berries and plums,
And whoever attacked her had reckoned it fitting
to cracker her head with a sprinkle of crumbs.
The person responsible wasn't detected.
They called him a hero—delighted and flip—
And suggested, as Clara was duly collected,
that he who had bagged her deserved a nice tip.

©2000 by Katherine H. Brooks

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NEXT ISSUE...

The Christmas Mitzvah
BY DOUG ALLYN

The Prank
BY ROBIN HATHAWAY

Gunpoint
BY MICHAEL Z. LEWIN

Avitar
BY JOHN F. DOBBYN

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE. Vol. 116, No. 5. Whole No. 711, November 2000. USPS 523-610, ISSN 0012-6328. Dell GST: R123054108. Published monthly except for a combined September/ October double issue by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. 1 year subscription $33.97 in U.S.A. and possessions, $41.97 elsewhere, payable in advance and in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Call 800-333-3053 with questions about your subscription. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to Ellery Queen, P.O. Box 54052, Boulder, CO 80322-4052. Editorial Offices, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10016. Executive Offices 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220. Periodical postage paid at Norwalk, CT and at additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Montreal, Quebec. Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260649. © 2000 Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, all rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention and the Pan American Copyright convention. ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE® is the registered trademark of Ellery Queen. Submissions must be accompanied by self-addressed stamped envelope. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80328-4625. In Canada return to Transcontinental Sub Dept.,525 Louis Pasteur, Boucherville, Quebec, J4B 8E7. For back issues, send your check for $5.00 (U.S. funds) to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Suite SM-100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220. Please specify the issue you are ordering. Add $2 per copy for delivery outside the U.S.

PRINTED IN CANADA

PRINTED WITH SOY INK

JANET HUTCHINGS
Editor

RACHEL FUNARI
Editorial Assistant

SUSAN KENDRIOSKI
Executive Director,
Art & Production

VICTORIA GREEN
Senior Art Director

JUNE LEVINE
Assistant Art Director

CAROLE DIXON
Senior Production Manager

ABIGAIL BROWNING
Manager, Subsidiary Rights
& Marketing

BRUCE W. SHERBOW
Vice President,
Sales & Marketing

SANDY MARLOWE
Circulation Services

JULIA McEVOY
Manager, Advertising Sales

PETER KANTER
Publisher

ELLERY QUEEN
Editor-in-Chief 1941-1982

ELEANOR SULLIVAN
Editor-in-Chief 1982-1991

ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE
DAVID GELLER PUBLISHER'S REP
(212) 455-0100 (Display Advertising)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

Ellery Queen November '00

Advertise to the world's largest mystery magazine audience with our Ellery Queen/Alfred Hitchcock combined classified section. Ad rates per issue: $4.95 per word (10 word minimum), $350 per column inch (2.25 inch maximum). SPECIAL INTRODUCTORY OFFER: Buy two issues and receive a third issue FREE. Send orders to: Dell Magazines, Classified Department, 475 Park Ave. S., 11th Floor, New York, NY 10016. Direct inquires to: (212) 686-7188; Fax (212) 686-7414.

BOOKS AND PERIODICALS

Bargain Books

America's *biggest* catalog selection
Great savings on recent overstocks, current books, too. **Mystery,** Biography, the Occult, much more.
Free Catalog 1-800-677-3483
www.erhbooks.com/bdh

FREE CATALOGS Collectible/used mysteries. Murder is Served, 5273 Bittersweet Drive, Dayton, OH 45429. (937) 438-0211.

MYSTERY ADDICTS! Free Catalog! New and recycled detective fiction. Grave Matters, Box 32192-C, Cincinnati, OH 45232, www.gravematters.com

BOOKS AND PERIODICALS

FREE LISTS. Quality used mystery paperbacks. Collections purchased. Steve Lewis, 62 Chestnut, Newington, CT 06111.

MISCELLANEOUS

FREE INFORMATION kit for inventors. Patenting/marketing services available. (800) 846-8368, Ext. 303.

TRAVEL/TOURS

MURDER MYSTERY CRUISE, 13th annual Murder Mystery Cruise, April 7, 2001. Seven day Hawaiian Island cruise aboard United States Line's ms Patriot. Guest writer, Lawrence Block. Call Cruise Works, (800) 876-6664.

FREE AD OFFER IN OUR MYSTERY COMBO

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF PLACING AN AD IN OUR NEXT TWO ISSUES AND RECEIVE A THIRD AD FREE!

Your ad will reach a combined audience of 300,000 readers in our outstanding publications – **Ellery Queen and Alfred Hitchcock** Mystery Magazines.

Call today for a new rate card.

Dell Magazines Classified Department
475 Park Ave. S., 11th Floor, New York, NY 10016
Call: (212) 686-7188 • FAX: (212) 686-7414

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SOME PEOPLE WOULD KILL...FOR A COPY

But you don't need to! Subscribe to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine and you won't miss a single issue of all the mystery and intrigue you love. Each year you'll enjoy 10 issues of 144 pages and one double issue of more than 240 pages delivered directly to you door.

Act now and take advantage of this special introductory offer,
6 issues for just $9.97!
Enjoy the convenience of home delivery and save!

To order by charge card, call toll-free:
1-800-333-3311
Outside the U.S.A.: 303-678-0439

BY MAIL

Alfred Hitchcock • P.O. Box 54011
Boulder, CO 80322-4011

Please allow 4 to 6 weeks for delivery of your first issue. Outside USA: Add $4 per year for shipping and handling. All orders must be paid in U.S. funds.
*We publish a double issue once a year which counts as two issues toward your subscription.

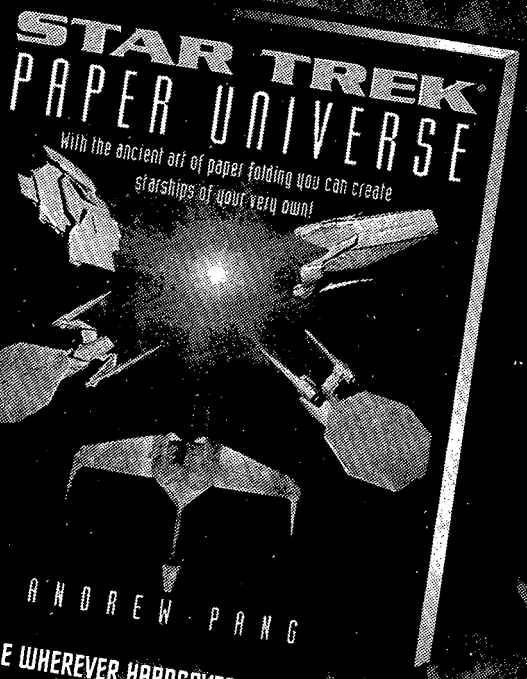
5P21

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE FINAL FRONTIER IS NOW IN YOUR HANDS!

CREATE A FLEET OF STARSHIPS IN JUST MINUTES — ALL YOU NEED IS A PIECE OF PAPER!

With easy-to-follow steps and clear explanations, *Star Trek*®: *Paper Universe* will have you making popular vessels like the *Starship Enterprise*™, a Klingon bird-of-prey, a Borg cube, and much more! The adventures and fun are limited only by your imagination!



AVAILABLE WHEREVER HARDCOVER BOOKS ARE SOLD

A POCKET BOOKS HARDCOVER
A VIACOM COMPANY

Visit us at www.SimonSays.com/st
and www.StarTrek.com

™ & © 2000 Paramount Pictures. All rights reserved.
STAR TREK and related marks are trademarks of Paramount Pictures. Pocket Books authorized User.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED